COMPLETE COWBOY

WILD WESTERN STORIES

2 NEW NOVELS

LAWMAN'S GUNSMOKE CRUSADE

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

HIRED HOLSTERS

COMPLETE SILVER KID NOVEL

by T. W. FORD

FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

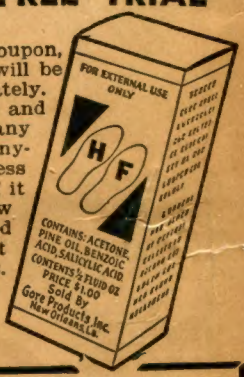
H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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881 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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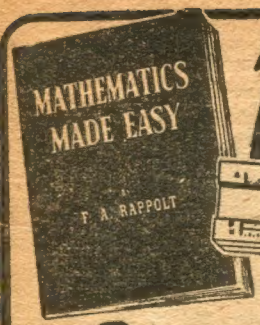
CITY ..... STATE.....



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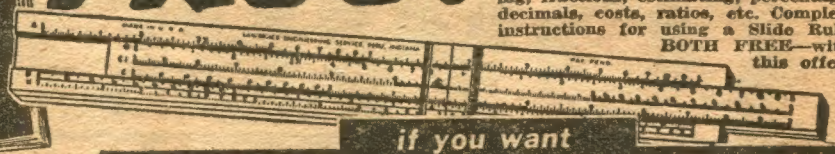

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COMPLETE COWBOY

WILD WESTERN STORIES

VOL. 4—NO. 1 SEPTEMBER, 1942

TWO NEW COMPLETE NOVELS

HIRED HOLSTERS.....(A Silver Kid Novel).....By T. W. Ford 10

There was something phony in the gun-thunder that echoed around Skelton Ravine, and the Silver Kid aimed to get at the bottom of it. So he joined the bushwhack game and hired out his holsters in bloody range feud. But when he found himself the target of the Colt coyotes. . . .

LAWMAN'S GUNSMOKE CRUSADE.....By Cliff Campbell 37

Jim Blake's plan to join the bullion bandits in the guise of an embittered Ranger, unjustly ousted by martinet Captain Waverly, worked perfectly—until he found that Waverly was the leader of the owlhoots!

TWO QUICK-TRIGGER NOVELETS

ONE VETERINARY, ONE UNDERTAKER, ONE GUN-WAR, By Lee Floren 55

Ringbone Smith and Funeral O'Neill had a problem on their hands. They had to clear Ed Burnett of the trumped-up charge that landed him in jail. But they couldn't let him stay there, because a necktie party for Ed was brewing; and they dassn't break him out because drygulchers' bullets were waiting for him. In fact they couldn't do anything. The way the old hellions did it makes one of the saltiest, punchingest, gosh-darn yarns we've seen in a long, long time!

A MAN CALLED TRIGGER .....By P. J. Delancye 92

Jack McCall came back to Tombstone to find that he'd been given a bad name so they could hang him. He knew who the coyote behind this game was: Slade, the one who had jumped McCall's claim and drygulched his partner. But Slade had things nicely arranged, and Trigger found himself tangled with Marshall Wyatt Earp, bane of badmen!

TWO SMASHING SHORT STORIES

BOOTHILL BAIT.....By Earl L. Bradsher 73

John Hale suddenly realized that not only was he working for the man who killed his father but that a ticket to Boothill was being made out for him. But the thing that dropped the world from under him was the suspicion that lovely June Ellery was only the bait for a killer's trap.

APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH.....By G. C. Ogle 81

Cass Hollister was tired of being a gun-wolf, but it was too late for him to turn back now. Yet, one thing could be done. The owlhoots had their claws on Cass' brother—he could keep an appointment with Death in Oro Fino and save young Hollister from an end like his own.

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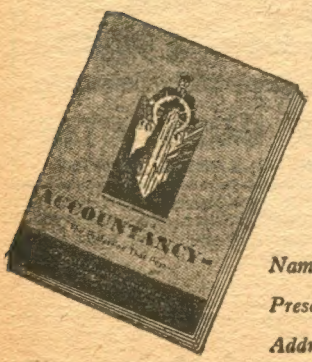

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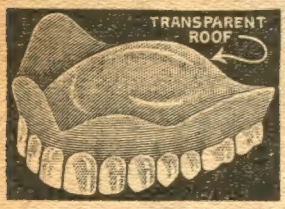

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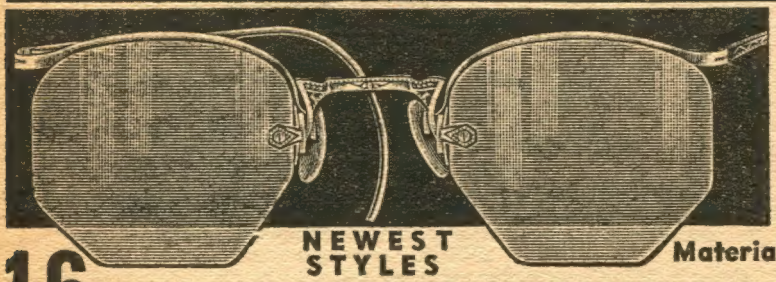

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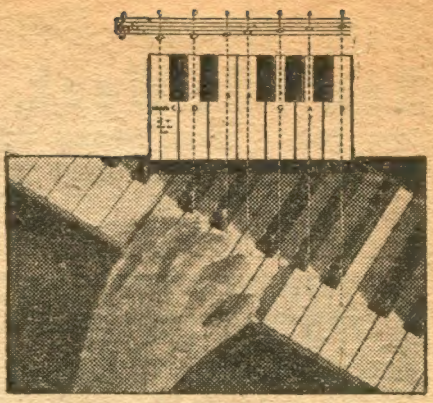

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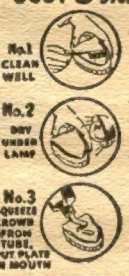

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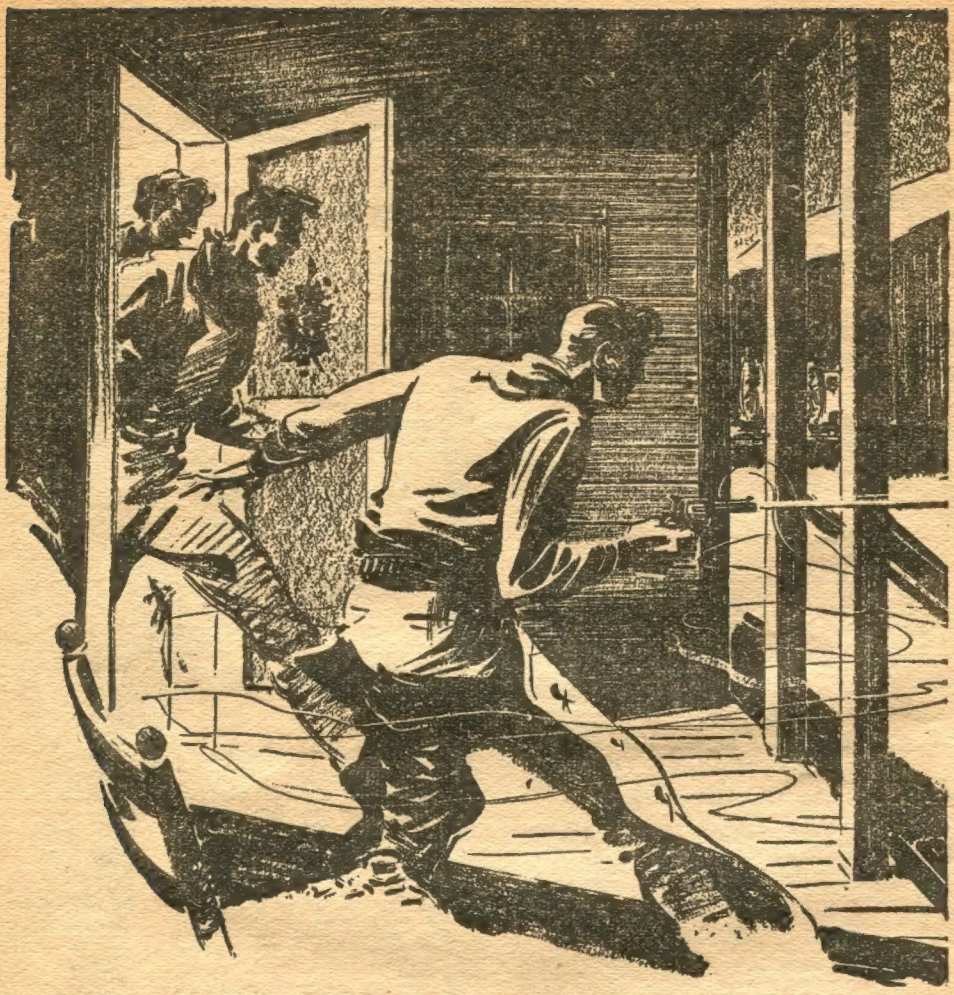
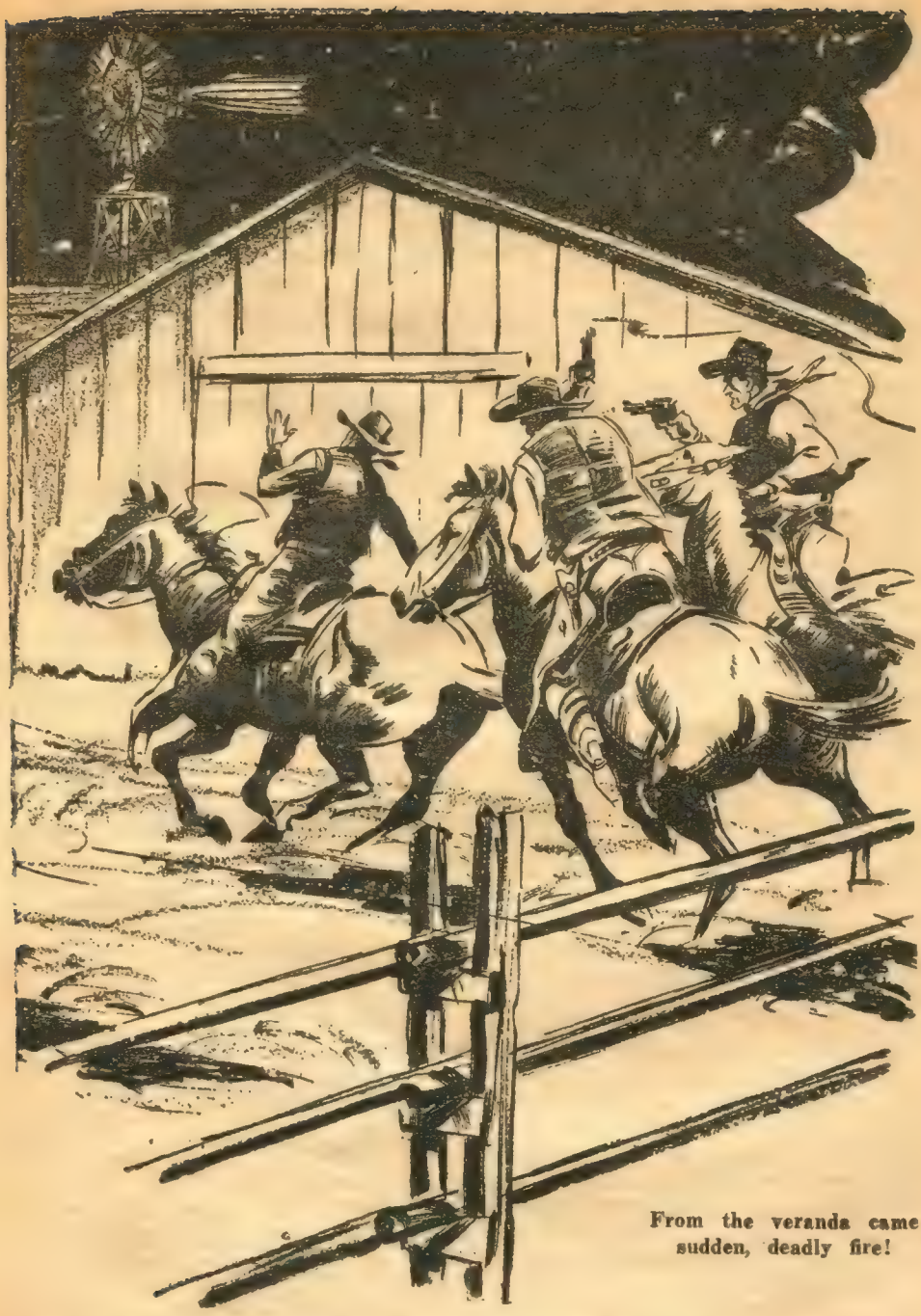


HIRED HOLSTERS

IT WAS like a gristly drama unfolding below before the Kid. He had just pushed his paint pony through the fringe of trees on the lip of the little ravine. Below, a lone horseman plodded along beneath the blazing sun, head slumped drowsily. His right arm, on the side toward Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, hung limply beside the saddle flap, a withered thing inside the sleeve of his faded red shirt. Even at that distance, Solo could see the emaciated, bony hand with the spidery fingers. It seemed as if the arm was paralyzed.

The Kid had already bawled out once. But the sultry, dust-laden wind blowing up the ravine ripped the words impotently from his lips. The rider below was almost at the mouth of the ravine where the stage trail running north-south formed a crossroads. The next instant, the Kid was out of the kak, dragging his Winchester from its saddle boot. Even as he dropped to a knee, he had levered in a shell, cocked

A BRAND NEW "SILVER KID" NOVEL



From the veranda came sudden, deadly fire!

Skeleton Ravine echoed with the gun-thunder of bushwhacker lead, but the Silver Kid caught a false note in it. He drew cartridges in the gunmen's game, hiring out his holsters in a blood-born range feud. A killing was building—the Kid found himself the target. . . .

by T. W. FORD

back the rifle's flat little hammer. It was all over in a few split seconds. He was too late.

The dry-gulcher, crouched behind a boulder on the lone raider's back trail, cut loose with his rifle. The Kid had a glimpse of the red-shirted rider as he galvanized as if struck by a hot branding iron. There was the crashing spang-g of the rifle shot ringing over the ravine sides. The rider reared up stiff-legged in the stirrups. His left arm clapped to his other shoulder. Solo could never be certain about it later. But he had a blurred impression, he thought, of that right hand starting holsterward. Then the man had flung himself sideward from the saddle to roll into the protection of the scant sagebrush lining the trail.

The next thing that happened was as if on signal.

Around the end of the ravine from the cross-roads, almost as if they had been waiting for their cue, swung a bunch of riders. They came busting into the ravine, pulled up for a moment beside the fallen man in the red shirt. Then they came spurring on up the ravine after the dry-gulcher.

He had already pulled stakes. Solo had sent one rifle smashing off the shoulder behind which he had been crouched. Its report blended with the back-shooter's own gunshot. And then the latter had been gone, scuttling through scrub growth and around a jutting elbow of the ravine side. A moment after, dust puffs from the driving hoofs of a pony had drifted out into view.

On the lip of the ravine, the Silver Kid was already swinging into the leather, calling to Sorghum, the paint pony, to break into a gallop. He rammed the Winchester into the saddle boot as he bent against the lashing of the low branches. He loosened the twin, silver-stocked Colts in the holsters of his double gun-belts. Those guns were rigged butts forward for the cross-arm draw. And he was ready to declare them in the game if necessary. Sight unseen he hated the breed of coyote who refused to do his gunning face to face on an even draw.

The ravine was growing shallower as he urged his pony up along the north side of it. Once, through the foliage, he sighted the fugitive. But there wasn't a chance for a shot as the rider ahead bolted up the short side of the ravine and into the broken country beyond. But even as he was disappearing around a sand-hill, he seemed to slow. The Kid was baffled.

Acting on a hunch, Solo veered to drive toward the backbone of a spiny ride in the broken country. Once up on that, he would have a command of the ground below. From behind and off to the left came the rumble of the pursuing band. Touching the paint horse with his dull-rowelled spurs, the Kid urged the animal to stretch belly more. The rugged paint responded with a will. Solo slid out the gun on his left hip with his right hand.

He smashed through a stand of alder and moved along the hogback. After a couple of minutes, he picked up his man. The fugitive had apparently cut in a zig-zag course. And he was going at an easy gallop now across a little clearing below. Gun hammer eared back, the watching Kid hesitated a moment. There was something in this picture that didn't fit. The bush-whacker seemed to fear no pursuit. Solo smelled a card dealt off the bottom somewhere.

SHOTS smashed out. The first of the riders from the ravine bolted into the clearing, gun jetting spurts of flame-shot smoke. Solo saw the fugitive horseman wrenching around in the kak, surprised, then wave frantically at them. He threw the spur steel to his pony, dashed into a little stand of gray mesquite. From up on the low ridge, Solo heard him shouting something through the gunfire. The man-hunters fanned out as they closed in.

The fugitive came bursting out from the back side of the mesquite as the Kid above kept pace along the hogback. The hunted man, bent low in the saddle rode like mad now for the protection of a low, brush-fringed hummock. He almost made it. But one of the riders behind rose in the stirrups, steadied a short-gun over his forearm. It spoke. And the cayuse of the fugitive half stumbled, a back leg wounded.

Desperate, the man twisted and triggered wildly back at his pursuers. One of them pulled up, gripping a nicked arm. But the fleeing gent was doomed on that wounded horse. He veered wildly, cut behind a rock outcropping that shielded him briefly. And from up above, Solo saw him drive for the sparse second-growth timber of the ridge side. Lead lashed at him, one slug piercing his sombrero, as he made it into the trees.

The Kid swung his horse through the trees to cut down toward him. He lost sight of the scene momentarily.

The shooting ceased. The wind carried the sound of tidders crashing through the underbrush. A man shouted twice. Solo went plunging beneath an overhanging boulder. From further down came a crashing gun roar and a man's scream.

"I surrender! I surrender!" the fugitive howled.

"We got him, boys!" another man bellowed. "Grab a hunk of sky, polecat!"

It became quiet. The Kid reined in, dropped to the ground and stole forward. Slid out his second gun a moment after he unconsciously fingered that tiny silver skull slung at his throat. That gesture was a sure sign of impending blood on the moon. He moved around another outcropping of rock and jerked back into the thick foliage there. Ten yards ahead there was a tiny clearing in the trees. In the center of it, the fugitive stood, trembling arms up, beside his wounded horse. A ring of men, nine or ten, closed in on him, guns at ready, most of them dismounted. They looked pretty much like regular bunkhouse hands. The captive was a round-shouldered little jasper in loose, patched clothes. He had a heavy beard stubble and his long-grown hair was unkempt. He was the picture of fear as his head kept twitching around piteously. The hidden Kid got a glimpse of his eyes. The poor devil had a half-witted stare.

"You gents are makin' a mistake," he whimpered. "You can't kill me. Borbee said—"

"Shut your head!" one of his captors roared him down. He was a tall, imperious-looking hombre with a hawkish nose. Even as he spoke, he leaped in and swung with his Colt. He took the prisoner over the side of the head and dropped him unconscious to the ground.

Another tall gent, plainly his brother, whirled on the others. "You danged lunkheads! Suppose there was more 'n one of these coyotes! Get back there and see if the boss is all right. Me and Les can handle him! Hit the leather!"

The rest moved off to their ponies. In a few moments there was just the waning sound of their hoof-beats. The two tall brothers stood there waiting, one of them building a quirly. Neither made any move toward getting the prisoner up and into the saddle to take him in or to truss him up.

One of them thumbed toward the unconscious man's wounded pony. "Got the horse all right."

The older one with a white streak of hair in the center of his forehead under his pushed-back sombrero said, "Who'll do it—you or me?" He spoke coldly as if it were a matter of repairing a piece of fence.

"We'll toss a coin," the other said. He brought out a silver dollar, tossed it into the air. "Loser gets the job."

THE hidden Solo Strant was puzzled, unable to imagine what the next move would be. He saw the coin flip in the sun. Heard the older one call "Heads." The younger one caught it on the back of his hand.

"Heads—you win. I do it," the latter said. He made two moves, lazy seeming, but so fast it was like the flash of light across a dark room. With one hand, he pocketed the dollar. And a gun slid into his right hand.

"Wait a moment," the other said. "One of them lunkheads might be snooping around. I'll take a looksee." He moved off down the slope on long, stalking legs until he could command a view of the bottom. He shaded his eyes to peer at the distant ravine. A little pall of trail-dust hovered over the entrance to it. Finally the older one came back, putting a match to his cigaret. "Shot while trying to escape," he said. "Go ahead."

Solo Strant had witnessed a heap of gunplay in his day. Seen men drygulched, smoked down in cold blood. Had himself looked into the cold muzzle of a cocked gun more than a few times. But the next moment the blood in his veins seemed to freeze momentarily. For the younger brother had stepped astride the prone prisoner and swung his gun muzzle vertical, right at the man's head. He was going to kill him as one would an injured cayuse.

And the Kid swung into action. There was no time for words. He had seen how swiftly the killer moved. The Kid's Colts blasted, two shots each slashing out. At the moment, the older one watching had moved a step. One of Solo's slugs jetted the earth where he had been standing. A bullet from the other gun nailed the would-be killer in the forearm even as he eared back the trigger. The man ripped out an oath as he spun.

The older brother, with a tremendous leap, was behind a big fallen tree, hands filled with a pair of guns. They thundered and the bullets sliced hissingly through the leaves about the hidden Kid. One caromed with a harsh screaming sound off the rock by his side. A shower of chipped stone struck him in the eyes, blinding him for a few precious seconds. It almost cost him his life.

"Hoist your dewclaws, you dirty sidewinder! Close in on 'em boys!" he yelled, trying to pull the old bluffing trick. He scraped at his eyes with a shirt sleeve.

But the bluff didn't work. Those two hawk-faced brothers were tough customers. The one with the gashed arm shifted his weapon to the other hand and rushed at where the Kid was hidden. Just in time the latter got his eyes cleared and snapped a slug that horneted past the other's head. The younger brother dived flat behind a little hummock. But the danger was in the older one. Covered by his brother's charge, he had scuttled away from the log and was slipping through the trees away from the clearing to get the Kid on the flank. Solo realized if they once got him in a cross-fire—

It was then that the prisoner on the ground came to. He clawed at the weapon he had dropped when he surrendered, flung up to one knee, and sprayed lead blindly.

Both the brothers half wheeled, fearing a slug from behind. And the hidden Solo had a glimpse of the older one down an aisle in the trees as he froze. The deadly Kid fired across the front of his own body with his smoking righthand weapon. The man moved toward a tree trunk at the last instant. But the chunk of hot lead seared a corner of his bulging forehead. The blood spurted, blinding him and he dropped his hogleg to throw both hands to his head with a cry of terror. He thought half his head had been blasted off. He started to run, shouting.

The brother leaped up, swinging indecisively, saw he was alone between two fires. "I surrender!" he snarled, pitching his Colt away.

Already thumbing fresh shells in one hot Colt, the Kid levered the gun up, triggered. He snapped off a low branch just over the older, fleeing brother. "Get shed of that second smokepole!" he called through the echoing snarl of his gun. "And freeze in your tracks!"

The bleeding-faced one obeyed, coming to a halt a few yards from their horses. Just his face visible through the leaves, the Kid gestured at the nearer one and told him to empty the shoulder holster under his calfskin vest. It was a good guess. Silently the young brother did as ordered, pausing only a moment before he dropped it to the leafy mould at his feet. It was too bad a bet trying to make a play at a man he could just barely see.

The Kid was thinking fast. The odds were the short but furious burst of shooting would bring the rest back. And he wasn't sure which way he was betting his cards in this game, that he was even buying chips in it yet. After all he had seen the seedy-looking little prisoner try to bushwhack the red-shirted rider. He made a hasty decision.

"Get going, you coyotes! I'm borrowing your ponies. Hoof it!" he called in that quiet, deadly calm voice.

They started down the slope, the younger one getting an arm under the other's shoulders. The former looked around once. Solo sent a slug whining past his head. Both broke into an awkward run, wobbling on their high-heeled boots on the rough ground.

And the Kid stepped into sight for the first time. Across the back of his left hand was a slow-welling crimson streak. It was blood. He looked at it with a thin smile. One of the younger's slugs had creased his hand just after that powdered rock had blinded him. It was a strange thing. For that scar, a bullet brand, was the mark he so often left on a foe's hand when he shot to disarm him rather than kill him. The Kid hated killing. And in the past, that sign, that bullet track on a gun hand, had always spelled death for its bearer.

Solo shuddered a little despite himself.

THE still dazed bushwhacker stood staring at the Kid, vacant eyes running up and down him from head to toe and back again. He stood speechless. But his eyes jumped from one to the other of those silver trappings the Kid wore.

At first glance, Solo Strant was an insignificant sleepy-eyed little hairpin garbed in shabby, patched black from head to foot. He was a half-pint of a gent, wasp-waisted, with ragged black hair hanging over the

forehead of his boyish face. He might have been any itinerant cowhand riding the grub-line. Then an hombre noticed the silver trappings of his rig.

His shabby runover black boots had spur rowels fashioned from Mex silver dollars. The flaps of his brush-scarred black bat-wing chaps were adorned with silver conachas. Those twin Colts—one still in his hand, the other back in its sheathe—had silver butts. The double row of buttons on his black shirt were of the same metal. And the hatband of his black, weather-warped sombrero was silver spangled. And then, beneath his sharp chin, joining the strings of his hat, was that sign by which many men who, though they had never seen the famed Kid before, recognized him.

It was a tiny silver skull, glittering faintly, so humanlike it was gristly. It had been the last thing seen from fast-glazing eyes by more than one killer now occupying a Boot Hill claim. The Kid himself had a trick of fingering it unconsciously just before trouble busted.

Now, the Kid advanced on the dry-gulcher. "Who're you?" he asked the furtive little gent.

The other just stood half-propped against a sapling and staring at that skull beneath Solo's chin, silent. He still seemed dazed by the gun blow over the side of the head that had left an ugly, growing lump. The Kid took him by the shoulder and shook him.

"What was the idea of throwing down on that rider?" he asked in that soft, velvety voice of his that still had a note of iron in it. "Come on, mister. Get talking or I'll turn you over to the law and—"

He had shaken him again. "Me, I'm Dummy Fick," the dry-gulcher said like a man talking in his sleep. And then he collapsed, pitching toward the ground.

Solo caught him and propped him against the tree as he saw the bullet hole midway up his boot. A slow trickle of blood ran from it. The leg angled sharply and unnaturally when weight was put on it. It was broken.

The Kid didn't know how the cards were stacked in this game. But he went into action quickly, bringing the horses of the two brothers over. He hoisted the dazed, wounded man into the saddle of one, then headed up the slope toward where his own paint was ground-anchored, leading the two animals.

"Me, I'm Dummy Fick," the wounded dry-gulcher muttered absently again. "Me, I'm—"

From down in the direction of the ravine came gunshots. It was the two brothers signalling to the rest of their bunch. The Kid swung into his own saddle and led the way at a gallop up the ridge side. He remembered Fick's horse back there. But the animal was wounded, worthless at the moment anyway. And Solo fully realized that that bunch would be busting the breeze on his back-trail pronto when the hawk-faced brothers told their story.

Dummy Fick sat clutching the saddle horn, staring-eyed, gripping the saddle horn and occasionally groaning with the pain of his broken leg. Leading the empty-saddled animal, the Kid turned along the top of the crooked ridge. They came to a meandering cow track and moved down the further side of the ridge through black, spiking chaparral. They emerged on a ragged trail running westward that twisted through the rough, broken country. Their ponies were lathered and dust-coated as they forked hard.

Dummy Fick had begun to sway perilously in the saddle when they rounded the squat flat-topped butte and saw the little valley. A narrow faint track between scrub brush forked off into it. The Kid had lit up a quirly. He pinched it out and went to work. He swung the docile Fick over in front of him on the paint pony. Then with a bat of his sombrero, he sent the ponies of the brothers high-tailing it along the main trail they had been following. He dispatched a slug on their heels as they rounded a curve to keep them going. Then he headed into the valley on the paint pony.

A hundred yards up, a narrow shallow stream angled across the rough track. He waded the pony into it. Dismounting, he moved laboriously backward, dusting out the hoof-prints with his sombrero. In the saddle again, holding the now slumped Fick before him, he rode downstream a ways, turned off into a slump of trees. Half a mile further on, he cut back to the track and rode on up the valley.

THE squatter's place, a miserable paintless wooden shack, crouched up a little side-draw. But when Solo half-dragged Dummy Fick up the sagging steps and batted on the door repeatedly, there was no answer. The Kid tried the door. It was barred. That was unusual in the West.

"What do you want?" a sullen thick voice called from behind.

Solo wheeled. A bearded man with a rifle at ready had stepped from the line of trees off to the left, held them covered. He wore a ragged pair of jeans held up by a piece of rope.

"Got a wounded gent here," the Kid answered.

The squatter came forward, squirting tobacco juice out of his matted beard. He had a cast in one eye that made him look as if he were perpetually staring skyward out of it. "I ain't no pill-roller," he grunted.

The Kid's eyes grew sleepier-looking. He knew he could have snaked out a hogleg. But he didn't want to risk a gun report with that trailing bunch possibly near the valley mouth. He got the picture. The squatter probably cut himself a piece of table-beef from the nearby range occasionally, did a little two-bit rustling on the side, therefore was suspicious.

"I'll pay you," the Kid said.

The squatter finally went around back and let the Kid and Fick in the front door. He slouched around the sparsely furnished front room, reluctantly boiling up some water and bringing out a cached bottle of red-eye when Solo demanded it. Cutting the boot of Fick's broken leg, the Kid washed out the wound as best he could and bound it up. Then he worked some red-eye down Fick's gullet. The latter opened his eyes and gazed around vacantly.

"Why did you try to bushwhack that red-shirted hombre?" Solo asked him. And got only that stupid look in reply. He repeated the question, then hauled out a gun and asked it again. Dummy only smiled blankly.

"Who hired you to try to get that gent?" the Kid tried another tack, cocking the gun audibly.

"Me, I'm Dummy—" the wounded man whispered. "I'm—I think I'll catch some shut-eye. Then I'm a-going into town an' buy me all the red-eye they got an—an'—" He sagged back on the Teton pole cot, eyes closing.

Solo felt his forehead. The man was building a fever fast. He began to babble incoherently, breaking into little idiotic chuckles. When the squatter came back into the room, Solo asked him if there was a doctor nearby.

"Over to the Settlement up north. Three-four hours' ride."

"Could you get him?"

The hoeman knuckled his bearded face. "Got a plow-horse. I could but—"

"Get him." The Kid tossed some bills on the homemade greasy table. "Take care of this poor devil. I'll be back in a few days."

The hoeman had hooked up the money with one snatch, good eye glittering. Then he shook his head. "It'll cost you twenty more," he announced.

The Kid itched to gun-whip the daylights out of the stumpy little rat. But he held his temper. "I've given you plenty."

The hoeman leered wisely. "Your pard here—he's wanted. Maybe the Law's after him. I'm takin' a big chance. You wanta take him away from here, it's all right with me. I ain't asking you to stay."

Disgustedly the Kid paid him twenty more, then rode off. He headed back down the way he had come. He had little to fear if he encountered the brothers and their bunch. They hadn't had a look at him in that gun ruckus. He had been just a few miles from Last Stand Bend when he had witnessed that attempted dry-gulching in the ravine. He intended to drift into the town to try to get the lowdown on it. . .

It was nightfall when he sloped down the hill into Last Stand. The range town lay in the bow formed by Yellow Injun Creek that bounded it on three sides, a prosperous-looking little place with a sprinkling of well-painted two-story buildings. The wan moonlight showed a half-completed church steeple spiking from amongst them. The night wind carried the jangle of a brassy piano from some whisky-mill honky tonk. Coal-oil lamps glowed from the stores before which buggies and buckboards were drawn up at the hitch-racks. It was pretty typical of scores of prairie towns the Kid had seen.

On a corner stood a big combined barroom and gambling hall labelled the "Golden Horseshoe." The Kid left his pony at the rail and walked in under the big yellow-painted horseshoe that hung over the entrance.

"YOU take your chances, gentlemen! You plays your money and Fate calls the turn," a fat, beaming faro dealer was calling from his table down the long

barnlike room. "She's all in the laps o' the Gawds! Make your bets, my friends. Take a chance with Dame Fortune. Napoleon took a chance! Julius Caesar took a chance! Life is a gamble, amigos. Make your bets!"

The bunch of men hedging the box stirred restlessly, muttering, singing out. There was the clink of chips on the table. Solo's eyes switched to another baize-topped table a little further down the room. Three-four men sat quietly there under a hanging coal-oil lamp the while a house dealer with a green eyeshade shuffled the deck. They were quiet.

The Kid moved toward the empty end of the bar, wondering if he was foolish to be nosing into this game. Actually he hated trouble, flinched from killing a gent unless his hand was forced by some gun-proddy lead-slinger. But he had tied the deadwood for the moment onto those two brothers who had been on the verge of slaying a human critter like a down cow that afternoon. Little Dummy Fick did not have the earmarks of a killer. And on top of it all, that dry-gulching attempt had seemed almost rehearsed.

"The best gila poison you have, amigo," the Kid said in that gentle voice to the barkeep. "Friend of mine told me to look up a gent called Dummy Fick if I ever drifted down this way," he mentioned as the man poured the drink.

"Dummy Fick?" The bartender guffawed. "Somebody was running a windy on you, stranger. Poor Dummy, he's a sorta half-wit. Harmless. Funny thing is, he's a shootin' fool with a hogleg. But he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"You plumb sure of that?" the Kid asked.

"Positive. Ever'body knows poor Dummy. Val Easter sorta supports the poor fool. Gives him a dinero handout now and then. Dummy's pop worked for the Easter outfit. That's Val Easter sittin' in at the poker game down there. The one with the white sombrero. Ask him."

Solo looked down and picked out the man with the white, pinch-crowned hat. He was lean as a fence-rail, hair an iron-gray and smooth as paint under his pushed-back Stetson. A jagged red scar snaked down the side of his long face, giving him a vicious, threatening look. He wore gray, unsoiled, almost brand new. A black tied-down holster showed where his frock coat hung down beside the chair.

"Calling you!" he snapped at a player across the table from him. He had a harsh snarl of a voice, teeth baring when he spoke. Even watching him from a distance, Solo Strant had a right strong hunch he'd be an ornery customer to tangle with.

The Kid was just lifting his drink to his mouth when that girl in the low-cut evening dress down by the faro table screamed once. The whole place was suddenly quiet, as if sound had frozen inside its walls. The barkeep ducked from sight, came back up with a buffalo gun gripped. There was a milling of men around the faro table, some of them getting back out of harm's way.

"That deal's crooked!" cried a big tough-looking hombre with a heavy black mustache. He wore faded Levis and a slouch hat. "You yella-bellied robber—" His hairy hand came up from a shoulder sheathe with that glittering Bowie knife and he lunged around to slash at the faro dealer.

The girl leaped between and clutched for his knife hand. She missed and the blade almost sliced open her face. But the knife-wielder's big hand clenched around it caught her across the temple. She slumped across the table. Simultaneously there was the crackle of glass and a body thumped to the floor. It was one of the pards of the black-mustached one.

Grabbing up a bottle, he had smashed it down across the head of the house-guard who had come running from his stool overlooking the scene. A nasty melee was building.

"You lowdown claim-jumpers!" It was the gaunt Val Easter who had kicked his chair over backward. He was on his feet, whipping a red hand up from his black holster. "So you're a-prodding for trouble, eh?" He tacked on a curse.

It was then the Solo man bought chips in that game. At first, he had stepped around the end of the bar to be out of the path of any stray lead. But even as he saw the three-four alleged claim-jumpers dig for their hardware, he realized the knocked-out girl would be trapped between the two fires.

WITH that double cross-arm draw as swift and negligent looking as the switch of a steer's tail in fly time, he had both silver-stocked Colts cleared from the

holsters. "Pen the hardware—everybody!" he called low but penetratingly as he glided forward. "I'm holding aces—five in each paw—lead aces! Am I being called?"

The claim-jumpers, wolf-faced and guarded, eased their hands away from their gun butts as they parted and sidled back from either side of the table. A shot spanged from Val Easter's Colt, socking into a post just above one of the claim-jumper's Stetsons. Easter had that hungry look on his scarred face.

Deadly calm as the red-frocked girl stirred dazedly on the table between, Solo fired. His slug amputated a piece of one of the upthrust legs of Val Easter's overturned chair. Just inches from the man's right hip.

"Backwater, stranger! 'Tain't none of your business," Easter snarled. "When I make a play, neither Hell ner highwater is stopping—"

The Kid answered him in that deadly soft voice, tapping that skull at his throat with one of his gun-sights. "Heaven will take care of the highwater, mister. And if you want Hell—I can deal it. . . . That stack of blue chips coupla inches from your left hand," he added.

He realized he was facing Val Easter in what might be a showdown. . . .

Easter's eyes switched to the chips. There were just three, a small pile, a difficult target. The Kid's carelessly held left gun leaped level to match the weapon in his bandaged right hand. Powder flash licked from the muzzle. Then the stack of blue chips was gone, the top one rolling across the table and onto the floor. The other two were shattered. It was all over in the wink of an eye.

The Kid spoke through slow-writhing gunsmoke, softly, with that deceptive laziness, even as the room still gasped. "Me, I hate gunplay and killing. . . . Plumb hate it! . . . . Mr. Easter, I guess you and these gents here," he indicated the claim-jumpers, "plumb forgot that girl on the table there was right smack in line of your fire. . . ."

Easter's slash eyes, narrowed in anger, opened wide with surprise, blinked, as he looked at the girl in the red dress. He nodded unconsciously as the girl groaned and stirred. Then she sat up, holding her head, and the fat fargo dealer crawled out from under the table. Folks closed in to see if the girl was all right. The gunfight was at an end.

"Right fancy gunning, stranger," a bluff hearty voice said as the hawk-eyed Solo saw Val Easter slip out a side door. The Kid turned to face the red-shirted hombre who had been dry-gulched in the ravine that afternoon. His left arm was in a sling and bandaging showed through the tears in the shoulder of his shirt. He was a bull-bodied man.

"I'm Borbee," he announced loudly. "Rufe Borbee. Right glad to make your acquaintance. I got an idee maybe I can use a gent like you."

"Thanks, Mr. Borbee. But my hoglegs aren't for sale." The Kid looked past Borbee. Behind him stood the two lean brothers who had attempted to kill the helpless Dummy Fick not many hours before. They eyed Solo without recognizing him. After all, they had had only a fleeting glimpse of his face through the foliage.

BORBEE introduced them. They were the Logg brothers, Silas and Ben. Si was Borbee's foreman of the Block-B outfit. Borbee tapped the little Kid's chest with the hand of the arm in a sling. The withered right arm hung limply, apparently powerless.

"Guns ain't for hire, huh?" He guffawed jovially. He had a round, fleshy face and big bulging blue eyes, small features. The face was always ready to crease up in a big grin, his double chin growing a third one when he did so. "Not for hire? Haw-haw. Strant, I pay top wages to a top hand. And I heard a heap about Solo Strant, the Silver Kid. Hey, how about some drinks? Here, let's sit down and—hellow, Ep!"

The white-mustached newcomer said, "Hear you got shot up some today, Rufe."

Borbee chuckled deep, nodded at his shoulder. "Some bushwhacker what was a danged rotten shot—thank Gawd! Just nicked the flesh, that's all. The doc bandaged it up. Happened over Skeleton Ravine."

Solo was watching closely. "Any idea of who done it?" the white-mustached man asked.

Borbee pursed his thick lips. "My boys just happened to be comin' up the other way. Gave the snake a chasin'—but he got away. We got his pony though. It had a Circle-E brand mark."

"Circle-E—Easter's brand?" Ep said.

Borbee shrugged as he sat down. A couple of hangers-on had vacated the table.

It was plain Borbee had power in the town. "Val Easter claims a hoss was stole from his corral coupla nights ago. Maybe so."

There was some muttering in the ring of men about the table. "Sorta strange Easter didn't report it before," one man said. "Aw, you know Val Easter figgers he's his own Law," another said.

"That makes the second time somebody's taken a pot shot at the boss," Ben, the younger Logg, cried hotly.

"Val Easter's been taking the Law into his own hands too long," an old man muttered. "Times've changed. We got to have order."

Ben Logg banged the table with a big gnarled fist. "I'm going to get that coyote who's gunning for the boss!" he snorted. "All I want is a chance to face him and smoke it out! I'll shot him inta buzzard bait!"

Solo Strant was studying them all from his sleepy-looking eyes. And they had lied about the drygulching. He was glad now that he had not admitted he had witnessed it. Ben sat rubbing his gun butt and swearing. Si Logg, Borbee's segundo, sat with hat shoved back from that white streak down the middle of his head, saying nothing.

The drinks came. Borbee waved generously at the onlookers. "Belly up to the bar, boys, and have one on me." It was his way of saying he wanted to be left alone.

Ep alone lingered. "You say your men wounded the gent's hoss and got it, Borbee?" he said.

"Yep. That's the way she was. I lay there wounded and—"

"Danged funny thing to me that the bushwhacker could get away on foot from your men," Ep said. "On foot?"

Rufe Borbee kept grinning but his eyes lidded briefly. Si Logg didn't move. But his cold stare whipped to Borbee, to his brother, back again. Ben Logg stopped thumping the table abruptly.

Then Borbee was chuckling again. "We didn't say there was only one bushwhacker, Ep. There was only one shot."

"I figure there was a second and maybe a third with the gent who did the shooting. When we tried to back-trail 'em, I picked up tracks of three horses," Si Logg said evenly, nodding.

Ep wandered over to the bar. Borbee poked a long cigar into his face and turned to the Kid. "I don't like the prospect of being burned down by some two-bit gunslick from the rear—some hired-hand killer," he said. Chuckled. "The thought don't help a man's digestion none at all, Strant. Now—"

"You or your men get a look at this bushwhacker?" Solo put in. "Have any idea who he is?"

Borbee swelled up. "You think I'd be sitting here calm-like if I knew!" he snapped.

"Never got a looksee at him, damn it!" Ben Logg said. And Si Logg affirmed it with a negative shake of his head.

The shrewd Solo wanted to laugh in their teeth. Borbee called the man a hired killer yet claimed he didn't know who he had been. It proved to the Kid that they had known Dummy Fick all right.

"Look, Strant," Borbee went on, pointing with his glowing cigar. "I got the dinero —I could hire myself a pack of gun-slinging hands—killers, if you want to call 'em. I don't believe in that. It ain't right or lawful. I know some about you. You're a tophand at holster work but you never bucked the law. I like that. Now I can offer you—"

Solo emptied his drink and started to rise. "Mr. Borbee, I said before my guns aren't for hire. I—"

"Sit down. Wait a minute. A man's got a right to try to keep himself from getting his chips cashed. Hiring you would be like hiring a special deputy. If you found me in the wrong, I'd expect you to hand the deadwood on me too. I like you because you're plumb snake-fast on the triggers—and a straight shooter as well!" Borbee jerked at his hat brim as he leaned across the table confidentially. "You aren't being hired to kill somebody, Strant. You're being hired to save a man's life."

HE LEANED back and gestured with his chin toward his withered arm. "Can't hardly call that my ace-in-the-hole . . .I'm sorta handicapped. And I'm offering five hundred for a month—and double if you get the gent who craves my hide."

Solo heard Ben Logg echo that "five hundred" in an awed whisper. The Kid stood up. "Mr. Borbee, I'll drift around and think it over."

Borbee gave him the big grin. "All right, all right. I'll be here for a coupla hours, Strant. Five hundred."

"Five hundred," Ben Logg echoed again huskily.

Si Logg looked up as Solo passed, pointed at his right hand. "Been in a little ruckus yourself?"

The Kid glanced down at that right hand he had tied up with a strip of cloth at the hoeman's place. It was a mere surface scratch. He had bandaged it to cover that bullet nick so like his own fatal lead brand. He smiled down at the slouched Si Logg.

"Yeah. . .Gambler over at Big Steer tried dealing one from the bottom," Solo said. "I'm sensitive about things like that."

"Knife?" Si Logg said with a dry smile at the Kid's wit.

"Yep, knife," the Kid came back. Afterward he wondered why he had agreed. It didn't seem important.

Si Logg nodded, feeling of that patch over the gash on his forehead given him by the Kid himself. Ben Logg was pounding the table again, talking about getting the hombre who aimed to kill his boss. He did his pounding with his left hand. The bandaging around that flesh wound on his right forearm, administered by the Kid too, showed beneath his shirt cuff.

Borbee waved jovially as he called for another drink. And Solo went out through the bat-wing doors.

He moved down from the corner along the side street, past a log butcher shop, now closed, past another barroom, a barber with one last customer in the chair. He had a strong hunch he was sitting in on this game until the last hand had been played. Borbee and his two men were lying. The Kid had a feeling that drygulching job had been staged. Yet, on the other hand, the Loggs had been ready to kill poor Dummy Fick.

The Kid was wondering if Rufus Borbee had some reason for wanting to get the impression around that somebody was out to get him. He had rolled a quirly and was about to pause and put a match to it. Then he dropped the unlit match and kept ambling along. When he was passing the open patch of ground in the shadow of the scapweed stalks close to the river, that quick touch came on his shoulder. Aware that he was being followed, the Kid wheeled as he ducked, straightened with one of those silver-stocked Colts filling his left hand.

And he rammed the gun muzzle plumb into the soft body of a woman wrapped in a ragged frock coat, hair hidden by a jerked-down sombrero. Her coat fell open as she retreated from the menacing barrel to reveal her low-cut red frock. It was the girl who worked with the faro dealer at the Golden Horseshoe. Her name was Susan. The big liquid eyes in her narrow face lost their fear and she smiled shyly when the gun did not go off.

"It's just me, Mr. Strant," she said softly.

Watching her, Solo had the feeling he had seen her—or somebody like her—before. She reached for his arm hesitantly and tried to thank him for what he had done to save her. The Kid pulled away almost brusquely. Gratitude always embarrassed him. But he did not notice she was not the typical hard-eyed, dyed-hair honky tonk girl.

"Mortimer Bean wants to see you," she said in a low whisper. "He's the faro dealer at the Golden Horseshoe."

A few moments later he was following her down a straggling path under a canopy of cottonwoods toward the river, going past little shacks. They turned in at the last one. She rapped twice quickly, then gave two slow raps, pushed open the door.

Mortimer Bean, the plump-faced faro dealer, sat in a big rocker behind the table holding the lamp with the winging birds painted on the globe. He was tucking something back into a pocket of his flowing coat as they entered. His flowered vest hung unbuttoned over his bulging stomach. Solo had not looked at him closely before. Now he realized he was one huge mound of flesh running to hips as broad as a pair of barn doors.

"'Evening, Strant," Mortimer Bean wheezed, half rising. "I see you have met my little Susan."

The Kid nodded, thumbs hooked in his double shell-belts. He had an itch to rub that silver skull at his throat but restrained himself. It didn't seem possible this could be any kind of a trap. "Howdy," he said.

Mortimer Bean held up a white, plump finger in front of his wide expanse of face. "Strant, get out of this town while you can walk. Don't get mixed up with things here. It's bad. And you're young to die. Get out of town while you can. . ."

THE kid smiled coolly. "Amigo, I don't scare easy. If you are trying to get me to fog it—"

With catlike agility for one so huge, the ponderous Bean flung from his chair, swinging toward the floor. A sweep of his thick

arm and he dragged Susan down prone on the aged horsehair sofa. "Drop!" he couched to Solo.

Acting on impulse, the Kid obeyed, falling flat in the shadow of the table. It was quiet except for Mortimer Bean's stentorious breathing. He lifted his head with a grunt. "'S all right now," he said, heaving himself to all fours. "There was somebody peeking in the window and I'd uh sworn they had a gun cocked. He—"

The Kid was at the door, had yanked it open, then dived low out onto the little porch. He had one gun out and ready. But aside from the buzz from the town and the purl of the river, there was no sound on the night. And there was no movement either. Coming back into the house, the Kid regarded the faro dealer with cold eyes.

"Hombre, don't try to run a windy on me again," he warned. "I don't get my boots And—"

Back in the rocker, Bean glared. "I yelled first of all because I wanted to protect my niece," he broke in angrily. "That's why I had her bring you here. Because I appreciated what you did for her at the place. Susan—my sister's child—she's all I got left in this world. If you'll sit down, I can tell you some things of interest. We feel indebted to you and want to help you."

Susan nodded, too. And the Kid, half conviaced, sat down on the sofa.

"This all harks back to an old family feud between the Borbees and the Easter clan. Rufe Borbee and Val Easter are the last of their lines. Borbee don't dare call Val Easter for a showdown—not with that withered arm of his he got when a horse tromped him," Mortimer Bean began.

He told how all but Rufe Borbee and Val Easter had been wiped out in the feud extending over three generations. Easter's wife had left him with their baby child, sickened at the idea of the killing. Bean toyed with the cards of a solitaire layout but his eyes slid toward Susan as he mentioned that last. Val's father had been cut down in that feud. Also his brother and a cousin. Borbee's father, two uncles, and two brothers had paid with their lives. Then there had been some years of peace.

But, crippled though he was with that useless arm, Rufe Borbee had not called it quits. He had the rich Block-B spread, plenty of dinero. And a little more than a year back, there had been some kind of a change in the government land laws. The faro dealer wasn't too clear about the details there. All he knew was that one morning a wagon train of strangers—the ones who were called claim-jumpers now—had rolled into town. At the Federal Land Agent's office, they had filed legal claims up in Sunset Valley, the land the new ruling made illegally held.

"They was a bunch of little outfits up there. Up at the head of the valley is Easter's own Circle-E. His grandpap had filed legal-like direct with Washington years before. So he was all right, though him and his men had a brush with the claim-jumpers who tried to grab off his place. I reckon Rufe Borbee didn't know about that early filing by Easter's grandpap."

The Kid sucked his quirly down to a coal. "You mean that Borbee brought in the claim-jumpers?" he asked.

Bean looked at a club jack, pursing his lips. "Not saying," he finally replied. "All I know is that somebody's supportin' them claim-jumpers sittin' on outfits without water! It ain't Val Easter. He hates 'em—like you seen tonight. All he needs is an excuse to pick a fight with 'em. And Borbee's the only other gent in these parts who could afford to carry 'em." He slapped a red diamond ten on the club jack.

"Outfits without water? How?" Solo asked.

Bean fussed around looking for a sheet of paper. Susan brought a piece from the shelf over the fireplace. He accepted it without a glance toward her. Susan kept watching the sleepy-eyed Kid as Bean sketched out a rough map of Sunset Valley.

"See, up here, at the head of the valley? That's the Circle-E—Easter's outfit," the faro man pointed out. "That there—that's the artificial lake formed by the dam on the north end of his place." He told how it had been formed by damming up the small creek that ran down the valley. The water piled up in the lake thus formed over the winter months and in the Spring so that there was plenty for the summer.

"Only now, since them claim-jumpers come in, Easter controls it so he has just enough water for himself. Opens the dam so not so much is backed up in the lake over the winter. Comes the hot weather, and he just lets enough through to water his own spread. By the time the creek gets further south in the valley, they's not more'n a trickle. And that dam and lake is on his

property. The claim-jumpers—and I'm not naming 'em that, mind you—they're about whipped for lack of water!"

Solo Strant nodded. He savvied it easily enough. Val Easter held the hole ace with that dam. He controlled the welfare of the valley and the folks in it.

"How'd the folks before the claim-jumpers get water?" the Kid asked.

Bean shrugged his pudgy shoulders. "Easter let 'em have it. 'S all."

SUSAN spoke up. "Val Easter used to say there was water enough for all and the rest of the valley was welcome to it. I've heard Ep and some of the other old-timers talking about it down at the place," she said shyly. "They said he was a fair and square shooter that way. He—"

"Supposing you let me tell Mr. Strant the facts!" Bean snapped sharply.

The Kid saw her eyes fire up briefly, her soft lips curl away from the teeth. It was gone the next moment. But there was something familiar about that grimace of hers.

"Now you see the picture, sir," Bean continued to Solo. "Tain't a case of law or justice. It is a plain feud with bad blood a-plenty on both sides. Easter is sore about them claim-jumpers. Borbee's droopin' a horn 'cause he can't finish that feud in gunsmoke. Trouble's brewing. I wouldn't want to be the gent caught between." He sat back and signalled absently to the girl without giving her a glance. She went to the fireplace shelf and got his pipe and tobacco.

The Kid nodded. "Thanks for the information, Bean. But still, somebody is trying to get Rufe Borbee."

Bean shrugged as he tamped down his pipe. "Borbee wants to hire you to protect him. Got a whole spread—Borbee has—and they can't seem to do it. On top of that, you made an enemy of Easter tonight. Val Easter is a bad hombre to cross, Strant. Plumb bad. . .I've put the cards on the table for you, sir."

The gambler brought out a bottle and offered a drink that the Kid refused. They talked a few minutes longer. Before he left, Solo asked about the doctors in the town.

"Only one," said Bean. "They say he's better on horses than humans—when he's sober. Which ain't often. You'll find him at the barroom at the end of the main street down by the river. Take my advice, Strant, and keep travellin'!"

"Are you hurt?" Susan asked, coming forward shy-eyed. "Doctor Evans isn't very good. Maybe I—"

Again the Kid had that feeling of recognizing some resemblance in her. He said it was nothing and left. He kept a hand across his body and hooked on a gun butt as he went back up the path. Back on the main street, he took his way past the coal-oil torches down toward the river. The buildings thinned out. He made out a wooden bridge in the moonlight that came through the tree-tops nodding over the river. A few yards before it, lights came from a low dobie building crouched on the bank. It was the last barroom.

Solo went in. There was a yawning bartender in a dirty flour-sack apron, an orey-eyed gent sleeping in a chair against the side wall, a little man in a gray stove-pipe hat at a drunken angle at the bar. "Looking for Doc Evans?" the Kid called.

"Gone out. Won't be back before mornin'. 'Less 'n it's a case of child delivery, the patient'll have to wait," said the man in the stove-pipe hat without looking around. "I'll tell him you was here."

The Kid went up to the bar and ordered two drinks of whisky, indicating one for the other gent. "Just wanted to tell him his horse was stolen," he said off-handedly.

"Wh-what?" Doc Evans, the little man propping up the stove-pipe hat, popped around so fast he spilled his drink over one of his frayed white shirt cuffs. "My hoss—"

"Have another drink on me," the Kid invited, smiling blankly. "Just wanted you to have a look at my hand, Doc. But I can see you're busy tonight. So it can wait till morning."

The Doc gave him a sly smile and chuckled. "Sure, sure. Had a hard day so I'm just—well—trying to steady my nerves."

"Sure. Guess you've been pretty busy. Hear you patched up my friend, Rufe Borbee."

Doc shrugged. "Weren't much. Just a flesh cut. Hardly more'n a scratch."

The Kid bought another drink and let the orey-eyed Doc ramble on about some of the real tough gunshot wounds he had patched up. Solo eased past the window with the cracked grimy panes toward the door. He had been working on a hunch that hadn't come out. If that bushwhacking job in the canyon was as staged as it looked, it seemed

just barely possible that Borbee might have feigned being hit and wounded. But that apparently was not so now. The Doc had treated him for a wound.

As the Kid passed, the gent sleeping in the chair against the wall came to, jumped up, stared around wildly, and dashed out the door. Solo followed close on his heels. He was just in time to see how near he had come to walking into a death trap.

A GUN fanged flame. Lead smacked into the door frame beside the orey-eyed gent plunging out. From across the narrowed road, a figure with a neckerchief as a mask across its face, advanced, shooting a second time.

"So you're sudden death on the draw, huh, Strant!" the man cried in a voice muffled by the makeshift mask.

That second slug nicked the reeling drunk across the back of the head. With a howl, he plunged into the ragweed of the gutter as if he had been pole-axed. "I'm killed!" he screeched.

Even as his left hand swept across his body in that dazzling cross-arm draw, the Kid realized the gunman had seen him pass the window on his way out and then mistaken the orey-eyed hairpin for him. Solo's gun was free, sweeping up. The masked one bit off an oath as he saw he had mistaken the other for the Kid. Then the latter had triggered, legs slipping wide in the gunfighter's stance. The masked one had already scuttled in retreat, firing frantically. Solo had only the faint gleam of his weapon for a target as the darkness swallowed his man.

Livid red-yellow flame knifed from the Dangerous Kid's Colt. There was a scream of anguish from across the road. The clatter of metal on rock as the masked one's falling gun hit a stone. The Kid charged, snapping two shots into the shadows. And then he was headlong in the dust as the scalp-creased orey-eyed gent reached up and clutched at one of his legs.

He thought he heard boot-heels on the planks of the bridge. But when he rose and glided down that way, there was nobody in sight. And the road on the other side, with no shadowing trees about, was bathed in moonlight. Solo moved ahead and listened. There was just the soft purl of the water. The Kid realized his man knew the place and had made his getaway.

Retracing his steps, he looked for the masked one's fallen gun in the road with the aid of a cupped match. He found where it had landed, leaving its imprint in the alkali. But beside the outline of the Colt was the pattern of scooping fingers in the dust. The would-be killer had recovered his weapon before he fled.

Doc Evans came weaving out of the barroom, stove-pipe hat at a crazier angle than ever. "What happened? Who's shooting who?"

The Kid thumbed toward the orey-eyed jasper now sitting up in the gutter. Two-three men came running down the road, one tucking his night-shirt inside his hastily donned pants.

"Somebody tried to burn down that poor devil," he stated. "Reckon you got yourself a case after all tonight, Doc." Then he eased off toward the main section of the town. He preferred them to think it was that'way, that it was not he the masked man had tried to get.

He strode straight toward the Golden Horseshoe. "So somebody craves to discourage me from hanging around these parts, eh," he muttered under his breath. "Said somebody is building to draw himself a load of free lead." He figured that "somebody" must be Val Easter. And the incident had decided him.

He walked into the gambling hell-barroom, straight over to the table where Rufe Borbee still sat. Nodded curtly. "Mr. Borbee, I'm accepting your offer," he announced softly.

Borbee jumped up and grabbed his hand with his left in that sling. "Set 'em up for the house, bartender! Strant, I 'preciate this. I'll see you never regret it. Sit down and have a drink on it!"

Si Logg looked up, smothering a yawn. "Knew you wasn't lunkhead enough to toss over such a fat offer," he said.

It was several minutes later when Ben Logg came in. He carried his wounded forearm more gingerly than ever as if the wound had grown sorer. Blood had seeped through to stain the bandage. He banged Solo on the back heartily when he heard the news.

"Fella, you an' me'll run down that back-shootin' polecat together!" he proclaimed. "Right glad you're with us! We'll git that snake a grazin' permit in Hades!"

They rode out to the Block-B that night under the mellow moon. Rufe Borbee's outfit lay a little west of the town. They

sloped quite a distance down a side road lined with Block-B fence with the brand burned on posts at regular intervals. The Kid could see it was a good rancho, well-watered by Yellow Injun Creek, the range plentifully wooded with deep draws to provide shelter for cows from summer heat and winter blizzards. The grass was lush. Rounding a bend they came upon the ranchhouse itself in the lee of a low hill across from a stand of yellow pine.

"Comfortable little shack, huh?" said Borbee. "'S a roof over my head, anyways."

It was a sprawling, pretentious, two-story dobie affair with a double-decked gallery across the front. It was the kind of a monument a wealthy cow baron would rear to himself after grabbing off a huge chunk of range. But when they rode into the ranchyard, the Kid noticed that one wing was uncompleted, foundations and a couple of unroofed rooms staring at the night skies. And when he followed the swaggering Borbee inside, he couldn't help but see how sparsely it was fitted out with aged, broken-down furniture.

"Strant," Borbee told him, "I want you to sleep right here in the main house—just like you was one of the family. Want a shootin' fool like you plumb close to me."

BUT when they got upstairs, the Kid was given a bedroom down the hall and around the bend from the room where the owner himself slept. "Other rooms ain't fixed up none yet. Got a heap of real high-class expensive furniture comin' in from the East," Borbee explained. "None of this cheap mail-order catalogue stuff's good enough for me."

Solo, after propping a chair against the door that lacked a key for its lock, saw that the room overlooked the back of the place. But the bend of the wing cut him off from sight of the long low bunkhouse. The ground dropped away sharply behind the ranchhouse. It was a long drop down the sheer wall to the earth. Right overhead, the wide eave of the Mission-style roof cut off all moonlight from the room.

He didn't undress, merely pulling off his boots and hanging his hat on a chair with a patched leg. He slid one of his prized Colts beneath the thin mattress and lit up a brain-pill before going to sleep.

Maybe the fat Mortimer Bean was right after all, he figured. Mixing in a feud was plumb bad business. It had nothing to do with the law, was something outside it many a John Law himself gladly washed his hands of and ignored. They were often senseless, the cause of which the active remaining principals had long since forgotten. And when the lid was ripped off, it was to a bloody finish usually with no mercy wasted on any innocent onlookers who might be drawn in. The rivals blindly went to work to stake a Boot Hill claim for the other party like blood-mad wolves at each other's throats.

Yet, on the other hand, he had seen the Logg brothers about to murder a helpless fallen man. Solo could still recall the trapped Dummy Fick's words about how Borbee had promised him something. Yet Borbee and the two Loggs claimed they had not known the dry-gulcher.

Then there was the hard-bitten Val Easter. Vengefully he had leaped into that gun ruckus with the claim-jumpers at the faro table. And the Kid had already figured it was Easter who had tried to burn him down outside that two-bit barroom where he had dropped in to see the doc. Hearing that Borbee was going to hire him, Solo, Easter had taken steps. That seemed logical enough if it were Easter who was trying to get Rufe Borbee.

"He's got my gun-sign on him anyways," the Kid told himself before he dropped off to sleep. He was thinking of the masked gunman whose Colt he had shot out of his hand.

The next morning, over a second cup of java at breakfast, Solo asked Borbee if he had any suspicions about who was trying to get him.

Borbee shrugged. "A man don't live long out in country like this without making some enemies," he allowed. "'Specially when a gent like me puts himself together a big, wealthy outfit. Big herds make some hairpins painful envious." He cleared his throat importantly. "But—"

"Val Easter, maybe?" Solo cut in.

Borbee pursed his heavy lips. "Might be. I'm not saying it ain't. Been bad blood 'tween our families for a long time. I was ready to call it quits myself. A man's got his hands full fightin' off rustlers and droughts and bad years in the cattle market. But—well, it was a Circle-E hoss that bushwhacker was forking!"

The Kid nodded. "You going into town today?"

Borbee shook his head. "Sticking right close to the place. Got some tally books I got to check up on. You want to drift around and look over the spread? Sure. Okay." He beckoned the Kid after him as he led the way to the little room with the rolltop desk that served him as an office. Getting to one knee with a grunt, he twirled the knobs of a little ancient safe in a corner, swung the door open. The Kid glimpsed batches of tied-up currency, some bills as high as a thousand dollars.

Borbee came up with a wad, stripped off a bunch of twenties, handed them to the Kid. "There's two hundred now to seal the deal. And you get the gent who's gunning for me—and you got plenty more comin'!"

"I think I'm right close to cutting his sign now."

Borbee's eyebrows climbed and he rubbed his ruddy fleshy face. "Uh—you have? 'S fine. 'S fine. Now you take a passer out over the place. I'll be all right today."

Mounted at the corral, the Kid nodded to the Logg brothers and swung south down across Block-B range. He hadn't missed the fact that Borbee had almost urged him away, had seemed strangely confident no dry-gulcher would be around potting for him that day. A little while after he got out of sight of the ranch, he veered west. It wasn't hard to find Skeleton Ravine. From there he swung toward that hoeman's place where he'd left Fick.

The bearded squatter lounged on his front steps, a jug of redeye beside him. In the rocky field to the right of the house, his plow stood in a fresh-turned furrow as if he had just unhitched the horse from it. The plow-chaser leered at him.

"Where's my friend?" the Kid asked.

The other shrugged and tilted the jug to his mouth as the Kid rode closer. "How should I know? He just bought my hoss an' rode off."

"Where to?"

The hoeman didn't answer, gurgling away, lowering the jug to wipe his mouth, then raising it again after a sneering shrug. In a split second, the Kid had whipped the Colt from his right holster and it was spitting. A chunk of the bottom of the jug was knocked off. Liquor sluiced down over the hoeman's legs. With a cry, he jumped up and tried to stem the flow. The Kid sent another slug whistling by which nicked his boot. The man screamed in terror, letting the jug crash, and backed against the front wall of his place.

"Now, get talking," ordered the Kid drawlingly. "Next slug'll chop off one of your ears. The right one, fust."

All the hoeman's arrogance vanished. Trembling, he blurted it out. The sawbones had been there, said it was only a bone in Dummy Fick's ankle that had been broken. He had strapped it up. And a couple of hours back, Dummy had left, buying the plow-horse for cash.

"Where was he heading?" the Kid demanded, flipping his gun by the trigger guard.

THE hoeman never took his eyes from the latter. "I don't know....don't know. He said—said he had to go see his friend pronto."

"His friend?"

"Yep, yep. Some friend who seemed mighty important. But 's all he said. 'S all, on Gawd's Word! Seemed like he couldn't git to see him soon enough.... He rode out down the valley like he was headin' for the main trail. Surprised you didn't see him."

That was all the terrified hoeman knew. Solo was convinced of that as he rode back down the tiny valley. But he was baffled. He couldn't figure how Dummy Fick, living off charity, happened to have sufficient dinero on him to buy a horse outright. And "his friend." The Kid couldn't figure who was so important that Dummy had to ride to him with a busted leg. He had never expected him to be able to move. His one problem had seemed to be to keep him hidden long enough to get information from him. But now—

"Pard," he said to the paint pony as he moved at a hard gallop back toward Last Stand, "we bought chips in this game! But we might as well be playing our cards blind-folded and face down."

Rounding a bend, he came upon a man with a buckboard loaded with rock-salt headed away from the town. The Kid reined down to ask him if he had seen any riders pass. He hesitated to mention Fick's name. The small-time rancher shook his head.

"Nary a soul. Strant, ain't you?" When the Kid nodded, the ranchman went on. "Hear Rufe Borbee hired you as a gunhand."

The Kid nodded again, realizing how fast

the news had gone the rounds. "Somebody seems to be trying to bushwhack Borbee. He needs protection. Killing's bad stuff and—"

The rancher nodded. "Going to git Val Easter?....That's what everybody in town is askin'?"

Solo shrugged, face as blank as ever. But he was eager to be busting the breeze. "Is Easter the man who's shooting at Rufe Borbee?"

The ranchman said he didn't know but that a thing didn't have to knock his eye out before he knew it was so. "Val Easter's been actin' like he was his own Law fer too danged long." Then he picked up the reins, saluted, and clucked to the bays.

Solo whistled softly as he threw the spur steel to his paint. The driver of the buckboard had unintentionally given him the answer. Val Easter. The Kid recalled how that barkeep at the Golden Horseshoe had told him how Dummy Fick was supported by Easter. That would be the answer.

He reined in again as he came opposite the sod hut on the knoll overlooking the trail, sang out. A woman appeared. She told Solo to take the north fork a half mile down the road to get out to Easter's Circle-E outfit....

It was mid-afternoon when he sighted the Circle-E from a rise in the trail as he pushed up the narrowing Sunset Valley. Easter's place was a two-story, paint-peeling wooden affair, plainly old and unpretentious. But the Kid had noticed along the trail that all fence was in first-class shape. And he could see where the bunkhouse roof had been freshly patched. He came down off the rise and around out of a cutbank of the road into the ranchyard gate.

He was just in time to witness a little scene at the foot of the porch steps. A cart with a dejected burro, ears twitching against the deer flies, stood there. Two cowhands slouched in the saddle at either side of a man. And Easter, iron-gray hair hatless, stood on the steps. Even as the Kid turned into the yard, Easter's lips curled back and he brought his quirt down over the shoulders of a big rawboned Indian breed. It looked savage.

EASTER looked up as the Kid rode near. "Danged fools!" Easter bit off with that curling of the lips, his scar writhing. "Everybody in these parts knows my rules. If a man needs a piece of table beef—all right. Don't believe in nobody starvin'. I can spare a critter or so here and there. But danged if I want my fences out. They's plenty of gates. Hell-fire and Maria, the lunkheads!"

"Table beef?" the Kid said, surprised.

"Sure." Easter strode to the rear of the breed's cart, lifted a piece of weathered tarpaulin. There was the butchered, skinned carcass of a steer beneath it, the blood still wet. The hide had been buried somewhere close to the spot of the killing. The Kid knew the technique.

"All right, Crow," Easter said in that harsh voice as he turned back to the breed. "Take your steer meat and git the hell outa here! But next time you need a few dollars—well, I'll be thinkin' of that cut fence. An' how's your wife—all right after that last baby?"

The breed grinned sheepishly, nodded, and applied the stick to his burro to move off with the cart. Solo sat straight, scarcely able to believe his eyes. This act did not fit the pattern of a killer who shot in the back or from the dark.

Easter was standing at his stirrup. "Know you're hired by Rufe Borbee," he said gruffly. "That's your business—though it's plain you ain't no forty-per-and-beans cowhand. But I'll admit one thing. You was right a-busting up that shooting ruckus at the Horseshoe. That girl of Bean's might uh been hurt." He turned on his heel abruptly.

But not before the confused Kid had noted one thing. Val Easter, sleeves of his hickory shirt rolled above the elbows, bore no scar or slightest scratch. There was nothing like a bullet track on either his hands or his wrists, no trace of the Kid's gun sign. Which meant he could not have been the masked gunslinger who threw down on Solo last night in front of the riverside barroom in Last Stand....

"Though I can't say as I think much of a gent what'd hired out his shooting tools," Easter remarked in that harsh voice as he climbed the steps.

The Kid's mouth jerked. Only he himself knew his smokepoles could not be bought. That he was stringing along with Rufe Borbee to save a man's life. And it wasn't Borbee's life, either. He said, "When a bushwhacker's riding, nobody has to buy my guns, Easter. If Borbee gets killed, it'll be the last of the family, won't it?"

Easter whirled, teeth bared. "What dif-

ference does that make to me? I'm the last of my line, too—though there's some folks who claim different?" He stuck his head in the front door. "Reckon you and me's got nothing more to say, Bean!" he called.

A moment later, the huge hulk of flesh that was the faro dealer waddled out. He smiled around, nodded to the Kid, then climbed aboard a broad-backed livery stable mare and rode out.

"You're makin' a mistake, Easter," he called back.

"Nobody can hold me up," Easter snapped angrily. "Anything else you wanted?" he added to Solo.

The Kid let quirly smoke drift from his nostrils. "Looking for a friend of yours, Easter. Dummy Fick? He here yet?"

Easter shook his head. "Ain't seen him in some days."

The Kid looked more dreamy-eyed than ever as he probed. "You wouldn't have hired Dummy to get Rufe Borbee, would you?"

Easter leaped forward, snatching at his black holster. One of his two men at the foot of the steps got his hardware half unholstered. But he and his boss were looking into the steely mouth of the Kid's Colt barrel before they could move further.

Swearing hoarsely, Easter stood there helplessly. "Pen that hogleg, Strant, and I'll come down there an' bust the daylights outa you!"

The Kid's boyish face broke in a thin smile. He had just about learned what he wanted. He was about convinced that Easter was neither the dry-gulcher nor the man who might have hired him.

A galloping horseman came tearing over the low rise down past the bunkhouse. One of the men said it was Sandy. Sandy waved wildly and shouted something as he quirted his heaving-flanked pony. When the animal slowed as it pushed through the high grass up the slope to the house, Sandy lit running and legged it up the porch.

"Boss—b-boss!" he panted. "The c-cl-claim-jumpers! They're coming for the dam! Over the east road. I was combing the ridge up in the north quarter for strays and seed 'em coming! There's a big bunch and—"

VAL EASTER was already in action, bawling down to the bunkhouse, telling the two hands there to get the bunch saddled up. He stepped inside the hall, emerged buckling on another shell-belt and holster and toting a Winchester.

"This is some of your boss' work, Strant!" he snapped. "Come along and watch it if you want to....Only don't try no tricks." He nodded to one of his men.

When the little cavalcade swung away from the place, two men trailed behind the Kid. They swung across a small creek, a strip of fire-guard, hit a cart-track that ran north along the edge of a slope of yellow pine. There was little said. The men rode with set mouths, hands brushing gun butts occasionally. Up front, Val Easter had his hat jammed low on his eyes, jaw out, lips curling back regularly from his teeth as he cursed silently.

They followed the creek that watered the valley, pushing at a hard gallop, then took a path that slanted up sharply through the timber of the valley side. Emerging on a piece of rimrock, the Kid had a glimpse of the dam, a log-built barrier rearing some sixty-seventy feet at the bottle-neck of the head of the valley. A few feet down from the top, a small stream of water poured through an opening. That was to irrigate Easter's range.

They came out at the top of the valley side onto a sandy path that ran down to the west side of the dam between heavy woodland on either hand. "There they are!" a man up front yelled, pointing toward a band of horsemen across the water. The latter were halted on a little bridge that spanned one of the tributary streams feeding the artificial lake formed by the dam.

"There's that danged Nesbitt!" one of the hands beside Solo said, easing out his gun.

Solo recognized the claim-jumper who had struck at the faro dealer in the ruckus at the Golden Horseshoe, the black-mustached one. And his eyes narrowed. "I smell skunk sweat," he muttered half aloud. That bunch sitting their ponies over on the bridge, advancing at the sight of Val Easter and his men, was too staged somehow. Reminded him of that dry-gulching in Skeleton Ravine.

"Going to open up that dam, Easter? Or do we shoot it open?" bellowed the leader of the claim-jumper bunch.

Easter's face scar went a-flame with fury. "Try it—and your own dead bodies'll be

floating down the valley!" he roared back. "You low-down, dirty, yella-livered—"

Some sixth sense made the Kid twist around in the saddle. He was just in time to catch the glint of a gun barrel poking through the foliage on the north side of the sand track behind Easter's handful of men. Down from it a few yards a man's sombrero showed briefly around a tree trunk. It was a trap, a bushwhacking job on a wholesale scale. Easter and his men were moving toward the dam, approaching the oncoming claim-jumpers on the other side, their attention riveted ahead. They were cold meat for the coyotes cutting in on their rear.

It would have been slaughter, a massacre.

Solo saved them. He had a gun whipped out, was throwing the spur steel to his paint when that cowhand deputed to guard him swung around. The Kid sent a shot skyward.

"Trap! Trap!" he bawled. Then he sent his wheeling pony crashing through the brush amongst the trees. He cut to the left to drive straight at where he had seen the dry-gulchers. The hot afternoon exploded with the rattle of guns as the claim-jumpers cut loose from across the dam. Their mission was to keep the Easter men engaged on the front.

With the lead spattering like sizzling hot drops in the leaves overhead, the Kid charged. The noise of his approach was covered by the gunfire. And he rounded a huge stump to see one of the back-shooters not twenty feet away, intent on levelling two guns. One spat. He never shot the other again in his life. For the Kid's slug drilled an ugly hole directly over his left ear, killing him before he hit the ground.

One of the coyotes had leaped out of the trail side and was down on a knee as he steadied a rifle. Too late he saw the wild Kid flinging his way, tried to bring his long-barrelled Winchester around. Solo triggered both Colts. One slug smashed the Winchester stock, a splinter of which gouged the hombre's face. He never felt it as the other bullet drilled through his teeth and out the back of his skull. Simultaneously a slug ripped upward through the edge of the Kid's black Stetson.

He flung his pony the other way, back toward the trees, and leaned far to the other side of the saddle. Beneath the horse's neck he sighted the hairpin, one of the bushwhackers who had tried to get him. A second bullet pierced the flap of the batwing chap on Solo's right leg. Then he was hurtling right at the man, flinging straight up in the stirrups suddenly. And he disdained shooting, instead brought his raking Colt barrel down in a savage arc. The man went down into the undergrowth as if chopped under, the blood from his scalp spurting up onto the gun barrel.

ONE of the bushwhacker bunch straightened from behind a rock to draw bead on the Kid. Another jumped from behind a tree trunk, swinging his two hoglegs from the backs of the Easter bunch toward Solo. Lead blasted the air where the Kid had been in the saddle. For, though they knew it not, those coyotes were matching gun hammers with a deadly devil of a lead-slinger, an ace gun-passer, inhumanly cool with steel nerves, and a past master of the art of gunfighting. The Kid had hit the ground, was on his knees behind a moss-crested hummock, firing once more.

Easter's men had been warned before the lead hit them in the back. Three of them came larruping back down the sand path, smashing slugs amid the trees. The bushwhackers were whipped before they could play their cold-decked card in the game. One of them screamed in mortal terror as he turned and dodged wildly back through the trees toward where they had their ponies hidden. Another raced after him, diving through a clump of brush as a bullet pierced his hat crown. The flight was on.

The Kid hesitated but a moment as he regained his saddle. Up the sand track, he saw Val Easter sway, then drop from the saddle when a slug went through his leg. The bunch of claim-jumpers, some of them dismounted, were making a desperate effort to cross the dam top, figuring their dry-gulchers would rake hell out of Easter's ranks any moment. They rushed confidently, outnumbering Easter's cowhands to begin with. Solo plunged toward the dam, firing.

A man halfway over went up rigid on boot toes, flinging his arms high. Then he jack-knifed and slid over the top of the dam toward the shallow creek far below, body pinwheeling. Another man, struck, fell into the water behind the dam and splashed feebly back toward the far side.

Abruptly, they realized the bushwhacking had not come off. The black-mustached

Nesbitt jumped back to the other shore and bawled to the men to return.

"Hold your fire!" Val Easter shouted to his men. "We don't want to kill any we don't have to! Hold it!"

The Kid holstered one weapon, rapidly shoved fresh shells into another as he waited behind a tree beside the path. There was a desultory fire from across the water as the claim-jumpers retreated. A puff of air opened a rent in the drifting gunsmoke. Through it, the Kid had a brief glimpse of a figure on the other side down by the little bridge spanning the feeder creek. The next moment, the man was gone behind brush. But he had looked mighty like Rufe Borbee, big, fleshy, brick-faced.

"You dang-fool polecats had enough?" Easter was calling across the dam.

There were a few wild shoots. And then the keen-eared Kid caught the heavier spang-g of a rifle through the noise. It came from down the valley below the dam. He leaped his pony across the path and through the tree fringe so he could get a looksee. Then his eyes almost popped from his head.

Far down the creek that snaked from the foot of the dam, a lone rider had come from the pine-clad slope to ford the creek in the direction of the Circle-E ranch. He rode slumped in the saddle of a heavy-legged plow horse minus saddle, beating it desperately with his hat. Even at that distance the Kid could make out the bandaging around one of the man's bootless legs. It was little Dummy Fick.

And further down at the edge of the pines, another rider was throwing down on him with a Winchester.

EVEN as Easter calmly assigned two of his men to backtrail the now fleeing claim-jumpers to make certain they went home, and deputed another pair to stand guard over the dam, the Kid flung into action. He preferred to play a lone hand anyway. It was his way to waste no words in a tight. He wheeled his pony, went by a wounded Circle-E hand limping along the path, then was driving recklessly down the track toward the valley bottom.

The rugged paint skidded on an outcropping of rock, stumbled, went down hard. The Kid leaped clear and scrambled to the stunned animal's head to help it up. The horse was hurt and dazed but went on gamely when Solo got back into the kak. He emerged from the woodland onto the narrow valley bottom and headed down it. A jutting elbow of the side forced him over toward the west to round it. Seconds seemed hours. And there was the flat cough of the rifle ahead at intervals. Then the snap of a short-gun replaced it.

The Kid came in sight of the scene as his pony pushed through belly-high gramma grass. Southeastward, Dummy was struggling up a rise on the hoeman's plow horse. And behind him, closing fast, came the rider who was trying to cut him down. Even as the Kid took in the picture, Dummy slid from the saddle into the grass at the top of the rise and returned the fire. The oncoming rider slowed. And Solo whipped his Winchester from the boot.

Levering in a shell, he snapped back the small, flat hammer. The gun barked. The shot wasn't even close. But the other horseman switched around to face toward the Kid, stared into the sun a long moment, then wheeled in the other direction. He fled down the valley, spurring hard, like a man caught red-handed in a skulking act to which he wanted no witnesses. And the Kid had recognized him. He was one of the lank, bony Logg brothers. Which one Solo could not tell at that distance.

He busted the breeze in pursuit. He waved as he passed Dummy Fick who had risen to his knees to stare. For a while, the Kid thought he was closing in. He snapped a few shots after Logg from one of his Colts. They tore southward down the valley along the cart-trail that bordered the creek. But finally Solo realized he was losing ground. It was seldom the paint pony, Sorghum, was outrun. But that crash coming down from the dam had shaken up the rugged paint badly. One of his forelegs was badly skinned. Logg opened the distance between them and went completely from sight behind a rise.

Solo pulled up, mouth wrenching bitterly. He turned and retraced his course. After a while, he pulled up and rubbed his eyes. He wondered if he could have gotten mixed up. There was no sight or sign of Dummy Fick. But on the rise where the Kid was certain he had seen him, he picked up his hoof-prints. Bewildered, scared Dummy had swung back to the pine-timbered slope that formed one side of the valley. Entered it. The Kid was able to back-trail him easily until he reached the road that ran along a shelf of the slope.

Solo just backed the weary paint into the cover of a clump of aspen in time. The defeated claim-jumpers, trailing homeward disconsolately, were coming down the line. From his hiding place, he watched them go by, a dozen or so, two supporting one badly-wounded gent in his saddle. They weren't saying much. When they were out of sight along a bend, the Kid rode out again.

But the trail of Dummy Fick's was lost, erased by the hoofs of the claim-jumpers' ponies. Dummy might have swung either north or south, might have crossed the trail and plunged higher up the pine slope at any point. The Kid knew he was stopped for the time being. He could spend hours trying to pick up the sign again and in vain. Lighting up a quirly, he tried to dope things out, finally swung southward toward the Borbee rancho.

It was after dark when he swung in the ranchyard of the Block-B. Smoking a cigar, Borbee came out onto the porch to meet him after he had unsaddled. "Have a nice looksee?" the Block-B boss asked jovially.

"Quite a spread you've got," the Kid said, smiling. "Anything happen?"

"Nope. Real quiet-like. 'Course, I stuck close to the place all day. Had my books to tend to," Borbee said as he led the way inside and told the cookee to fix up some grub for the Kid. "Hardly out at all except to go down to the bunkhouse once."

THE lamplight caught his boots as he pulled out a chair. The boots were muddy as if they had gotten wet after being heavily coated with dust. Then Solo knew. Borbee had been present at the battle at the dam.

"Don't worry none about it with you here ready to protect me," Borbee went on jovially as Solo ate. "After all, I'm paying you to see nothin' happens. I know you. So-o. . . . By the way, find out anything? Before you left, you said as how you figured you were cutting close to that dry-gulcher's sign."

The Kid emptied his tin mug of java and built a quirly with those deft, incredibly swift movements of his fingers. He caught the squeak of boots as the two Loggs came in quietly from the hall. The Kid obviously lifted one hand to his hat-band to pluck out a match. It drew attention away from his other hand that had dropped across his lap to coil on a gun butt.

"Mr. Borbee, the way I play my game," Solo said in that soft way, "when I hang the deadwood on a polecat like that, I shoot first and do the parleying afterwards." Then he glanced around in time to see the two Loggs glaring at him. Ben Logg, the younger, paled and his mouth shot open momentarily.

The segundo, Si, came forward after a nod to the Kid accompanied by a feigned smile. He extended a small piece of folded paper to the boss.

"Rufe, didn't want to worry you none till the Kid here got back. But somebody left this tacked to a fence-post out front this afternoon."

It was a note. Rufe Borbee unfolded it, squinted, then read, a blunt forefinger moving from word to word. He jumped up, slammed the table and shoved it over to the Kid. "So you was cuttin' the dry-gulcher's sign, huh? But while you was traipsing around, he was here! Right here!" He began to pace, striking his bootheels down hard.

Calmly the Kid took the note and flattened it out. It was rudely printed on a torn piece of heavy brown paper. It read:

> Rufe Borbee, I'll get you yet. I ain't licked none. You ain't goin to see another sunrise. An I'll take care of that Kid too. So long. See you in Boot Hill. . . .

That was all. With that printing, the hand-writing gave no clue. The Kid asked a few questions. Si Logg simply said he had seen it fluttering on the fence-post. Figured the rider had slipped out of the woodland across the road from the house.

"Yep, that'd be it," the Kid said as if agreeing. But he wasn't fooled. He saw through the too ready smiles that had greeted him, realized well enough that he was surrounded by enemies. And he wasn't fool enough to believe the alleged dry-gulcher could cross the road in broad daylight in sight of the house and leave that note unnoticed.

"You're gettin' five hundred dollars to protect the boss," Ben Logg spoke for the first time. "Five hundred." It was intended as criticism of the Kid. But he could not keep the awe for that much dinero out of his voice.

"I'll stay right close to you till you turn in," Solo told Borbee.

The latter glared his way. "I'll be grab-

bing my shut-eye early tonight. Working on all them figures always tires me out."

They talked a while longer. The Loggs left. Borbee yawned mightily and led the way upstairs. Inside his room, the Kid shucked off his boots and lit up a fresh smoke. His mouth twisted in a silent curse as he remembered how close he had been to Dummy Fick only to lose him. The poor little half-wit was the key to the whole setup, the Kid was certain.

One thing he had realized downstairs when the Loggs entered. It had come to him suddenly. One of the Loggs had trailed him to the hoeman's place where he had left Dummy. After he, Solo, had left there, the Logg brother had got the story from the plow-chaser. It would have been easy enough considering the enmity the latter would hold for Solo. And Logg, whichever one it was—had figured at once where Dummy was heading and taken another trail toward Easter's place. He would know the country better than the Kid. And then he had overtaken Dummy as he tried to get across the valley.

THAT explained how Logg had appeared on the scene. And that meant they knew the game that he, the Kid, was playing. They weren't fools. They could put the well-known two and two together.

"That note—" Solo found his fingers at the silver skull of the chin-strings of his sombrero that lay on the bed beside him. Somehow, a trap was being set, a trap for him. Nobody was actually trying to get Borbee. He knew that now. Borbee had been too willing to let him leave and ride over the place that day. He wanted him out of the way, of course, when he rode with the claim-jumpers to the dam. And—

A pony was coming up the road. The Kid, cut off from view of it, listened carefully. The horse turned in at the ranchyard. There was the scrape of the heavy front door opening. Then furtive boots squeaked past the door of his room. He heard the grunt of voices from down where Borbee slept. A half minute later, two pairs of boots went stealthily past his door.

Loosening a Colt in its holster, the Kid pulled the chair away from his door and stepped out. For a moment, he was blinded by the sudden light of a lantern on the floor down the line. Close by it, at the head of the stairs, Si Logg sat slouched in a chair, a Colt in his lap.

"Somebody just came here," Solo said.

Logg's long fingers wrapped around the gun. "Friend of the boss'. . . . He don't want to be interrupted," he added flatly as the Kid advanced. He had the drop on Solo.

The Kid shrugged. "Just earnin' my pay," he said as he feigned a yawn, then went back inside. He realized he was as good as a prisoner.

It didn't take him long to go into action. He didn't bother donning his boots. He braced the chair against the door, then went to the window. A few seconds later, he was swinging out under the wide eave, then pulling himself up over it. Crouched, he moved across the flat roof toward the other rear corner of the main segment of the house. It was as he had guessed. The cookshack poked out from the rear there, a wooden addition that had been tacked on. It was only a story drop to it. The Kid made it, slid off the edge of that to the ground. A light burned behind a drawn shade in the room that served the Block-B owner as an office.

The Kid cat-footed toward the rear window. Luck was with him. The shade was not drawn all the way down, leaving a gap of a scant two inches. And the window itself was pulled down from the top. Pulling off his hat, he straightened to peer in. Borbee was there all right, his side toward the window, holding the wrist of his withered arm in his left hand. And across the desk from him, Mortimer Bean's body engulfed a straight chair. Bean's face gleamed with cupidity.

"Why've you come to me?" Borbee shot as the Kid watched and listened.

The faro dealer slapped at a night insect. "'Cause I know you might be right interested in seein' the end of the Easter clan. And—because you got dinero."

"You say you've been to Easter?"

Bean nodded. "He won't listen to none. Says he ain't to be black-mailed. Here I'm only trying to help a man and—" The gambler spread his fat white hands pitifully.

"Sure, I know. You wanta help," Borbee sneered.

"Easter claims he got a letter from back East some time after his wife left. Claims the letter told him his wife and the baby girl had died."

"Yeah? Maybe you're runnin' a tall bluff yourself!"

Bean shook his huge head vehemently.

"I oughta know. Easter's wife was my sister. When she died, I took the child and raised her. Got the birth documents and all the papers to prove she's Val Easter's girl."

Borbee tapped the desk with his cold cigar butt, tonguing his lips slowly. "What do you want me to do?"

BEAN made a forceful gesture as if he were sweeping cards from a table. "You hate Easter. If anything happens to him—well, he ain't got no heirs. The girl herself don't know who she is. Her mother raised her under her maiden name, Bean. Su—she don't know a thing. If Easter gets killed—dies—and leaves no heir—well, you know what'd happen to his ranch. You'd be the top man in this piece of country and—"

"I am now!" Borbee snorted. "I—" He broke off.

"Now if you had the proof about the heir—well, nobody else would know. Only you and me. And—hells bells, Borbee, I got a price!"

Borbee had risen. "Won't Easter even look at the girl to see if she is his daughter and—"

Bean smiled slyly. "Mister, I'm a gambler, a tough one. I don't show my hole card. I didn't tell him who or where she is."

"Who is she?" Borbee asked. "I don't care none 'bout legal papers. They can be faked just like a brand-blottin' job! I can pay. But I gotta know." He nodded toward the safe.

Bean rose, wheezing, and the two men stood close. The name of the girl was whispered. Outside, Solo Strant was unable to catch it. Borbee stepped away, smiling incredulously. He chuckled a couple of times. Then he patted the faro dealer's fleshy shoulder.

"Bean, my friend, I'll be in to see you fust-off come mornin'. I reckon you and me can do business."

He turned toward the window to hide the look on his face from Bean and almost spotted the Kid. Solo ducked just in time. He heard Bean leave. When he dared risk a look again, the two Loggs were in there with Borbee.

"We'll be ridin' to town later tonight," Borbee announced.

Si Logg frowned. "Them claim-jumpers'll be in there lickering up after what happened this afternoon. Mightn't be so good for you to be seen around 'em, boss."

Borbee waved him silent. "We're picking up an ace-in-the-hole in town—a right pretty one too. We get——get that card—and we can make Val Easter eat crow and back water! He'll be finished!"

"But that other job," Ben Logg said.

"We'll do that first. An' we got to make it look good for the gent in the bunkhouse," Borbee said. "He's still in his room?" They moved out as Borbee blew out the lamp.

The Kid worked swiftly, pulling himself up the side of the cookshack. With the aid of a shutter on the window of an unoccupied room, he was able to regain the room. A few seconds later, he was swinging down from the eave and back into his own room. Somebody was already pounding and pushing at his door, calling out.

He shed his hat, rumpled the blanket on his head, then stumbled toward the door as if just awakened. When he pulled away the chair and opened it, he had a gun dangling from his hand. But his finger was through the trigger guard, ready to flip it up in a split second. Si Logg glared at him from the hall.

"Been poundin' and calling you for five minutes!" he snapped.

"I sleep real heavy," Solo said, smothering a fake yawn.

"Fine help you'd be if the boss was in trouble. Better not block the door so I can git you in case something happens." It was an order.

And after he closed the door, Solo obeyed. He was playing the old game of letting a criminal have enough rope. It was a sure-fire bet the would-be killer would form a hang-noose for himself with it.

The Kid only thought a moment. Then he got his boots on, made certain both his prized Colts were fully loaded. After that, he fixed up his pillow and an extra blanket beneath the bed-clothes so that it looked as if a figure lay there. He hated to leave his sombrero behind him. But he propped it at the head of the dummy figure as if he had it over his face. Then he was swinging out by the eave lip again, over it, crossing the roof.

When he got to the ground, he surveyed the darkened bunkhouse and picked his way to the corral. A low whistle brought his obedient, well-trained paint over. He

got his kak from the saddle rack and saddled up the animal, drew it through the corral gate, and left it tethered just outside. Then he settled down to wait for the next play in this strange game.

His hand toyed with that silver skull at his throat. Once he inspected the scar beneath that bandage he had kept on his hand. It sure looked like his own gun sign, the fatal bullet brand. He tore the bandage away. He didn't want any loose cloth catching on the holster in the showdown draw. And he knew that was close.

He thought about Mortimer Bean. The game he was playing was pretty clear now. A dirty, sneaking game, too. And Solo sensed that Borbee intended to work a double-cross on the faro man, that he had no intention of paying his price. The Kid blinked in the darkness as it came to him who Val Easter's supposedly dead daughter must be. She was—

THERE was a scream from the house. Then a burst of shots from within the walls. The Kid was on the run for the big gallery. As he leaped up the steps and pushed open the unbarred front door, there was another spatter of gunfire. He plunged up the stairs.

Borbee, tucking his nightshirt into his pants, and Si Logg, were at the open door of the Kid's room. Gunsmoke drifted in the doorway, through the beam from the lantern Logg held. Borbee whirled, unable to see the Kid clearly as he ran from the dimness at the other end of the hall.

"They got Strant! Shot him in bed and —" Borbee started to shout. Logg, gun hammer cocked, had started cautiously in toward the bed where the stuffed figure lay.

Then Rufe Borbee recognized the advancing Kid. "You—y-you—" he gasped.

Solo nodded with that thin smile. "Figured some trouble was building so I slipped out," he stated calmly.

Logg had turned to stare goggle-eyed. Both his own guns bared, Solo looked in. In the lantern light, he saw the bullet holes in the blanketed dummy figure and the two perforations in the hat. He realized they had tried to get him.

"Somebody slipped in when I dozed, I reckon," Si Logg said weakly.

"Must uh gotten out by the back stairs," Borbee said quickly as he turned down the hall, pulling a hogleg from his waistband.

The Kid thrust him ahead of him down the stairs, knowing he had to fear no back-shooting while he had the boss' back covered. "Reckon he planned to git you first, then me!" Borbee roared.

They went out onto the gallery, now dyed in the light of the rising moon. "If I can git my hands on that lowdown snake—" Borbee was blustering bravely as he rushed out into full view.

There was the vicious spang-g of a rifle. And simultaneously a shell whistled viciously close to Borbee's head and slashed a chunk from one of the gallery uprights not six inches from his head. Borbee dived for the ground, squealing, face belly-white with fear and surprise.

The Kid run off the porch. "I'll give him a catching!" From behind him, as he headed for the corral, he caught Borbee's horse. "Let him go" to Si Logg. Lights were winking on in the bunkhouse as the Kid swung into the saddle. He pounded out the gate at the far end of the ranchyard and turned up the trail away from town. That was to throw them off. He meant to double back.

Because, just as the gunning started, he had realized that the girl Mortimer Bean knew was Val Easter's legal daughter must be that Susan who helped him at the fargo table. Borbee would be striking there soon.

But there was one thing that didn't fit the pattern. That last shot at Borbee. The latter had not expected it. That had been no bogus attempt on his life, a staged dry-gulching. That bullet had been too close and Borbee had been genuinely terrified.

Around a bend, beyond sight of the ranch house, the Kid turned off the trail at the edge of the timber stand, slowed. His pony moved quietly over a stretch of sand. And a horse and rider emerged ten yards further up from the trees.

"Missed him, dang it! Missed him," the rider was cursing bitterly aloud, still gripping the Winchester he had used.

"Grab a hunk of sky!" the Kid called softly yet menacingly as he levelled his guns on the other horseman's back.

The latter twisted around, dumfounded. It was Ben Logg.

Riding close quickly, the Kid bade him drop the rifle, plucked the Colt from Ben's holster, yanked a hideout .38 from beneath his vest. Ben Logg quaked in the saddle with fear.

"Now we'll go back to—" the Kid started.

Logg sneered. "Like hell! Borbee tried to git you. You ain't sticking your head in another gun trap and—"

Solo changed his line quickly. "I said—back to town where we'll send for the county sheriff!"

"I—I missed him," Ben Logg half whined. "I didn't do nothing. I—"

"Hell with Borbee," the Kid said negligently. "Don't you think I found Dummy Fick after I failed to catch you this afternoon?"

It was a shot in the dark but it worked. It had been Ben of the Logg brothers who had thrown down on the fleeing Dummy. And he had no way of knowing Solo had failed to find the man when he returned to the scene. Ben's jaw unhinged and worked weakly and futilely.

Then he got a grip on himself. "You always do play with the Law, don't you, Strant? All right. I ain't hangin' to save nobody else's neck. Sure, I tracked you to that' hoeman's place. You—hell, you must uh been the jasper who saved Dummy when we was about to—to cash his chips the other day."

THE Kid nodded curtly. "Ben, I got a plumb proddy trigger finger. Keep talkin'—and plumb fast, amigo!"

Ben tongued his lips. Nodded. "All right. Sure we was goin' to kill Dummy. That was part of the plan. Borbee hired the poor fool—he can shoot like a devil though—to fake a dry-gulching attempt on him an' come close. Borbee faked the wound afterwards by laying open his shoulder with a knife."

It was a scheme Solo had encountered before. But cunningly executed. Borbee, afraid to face his hated rival face to face, was out to bust him and run him out of the country, possibly killing him in one of those skirmishes between the Easter bunch and the claim-jumpers. But Easter had a rep for squareness in the country. It would be dangerous to hunt him.

So Borbee had the faked attempts on his life staged, setting the scene so it looked as if Easter were behind them. Dummy, supported by Easter's charity and riding a stolen Circle-E horse, was perfect for the role. The Kid himself had overheard some of the reactions of gents in town who believed Easter was trying to get Borbee. It would turn the tide of public opinion, this plan of Rufe Borbee's to make it look as if he were the hunted one.

"'S why the boss hired you," Ben went on. "Folks know you're straight. Then we found you knew too much—" He said the rest with a shrug.

"You just tried to get him now?" Solo reminded him.

Ben's eyes glittered. "Me gettin' just tophand's pay. And you gettin' promised five hundred. And all that dinero he's got in his safe. He—"

The Kid held up a hand as he heard the yells come down the night from the Block-B. They were getting ready to head for town.

Ben talked a few moments longer. "Now, I turned state's evidence so—"

"Sure," the Kid said softly. Then he leaned from the kak and slapped one of his gun barrels across Ben Logg's head. He had to work fast. Dropping to the ground, he trussed up the man with his gunbelt and a torn strip of his shirt, left him propped against a tree stump. Remounting, the Kid cut back through the timber stand, headed for Last Stand. He held the cards now, knew what the play was for the first time.

It was late but the Golden Horseshoe was going full blast when he sauntered in, wiping the trail-dust from his face. The fat Bean was chanting his come-on over his faro box, fat, good-natured face beaming under the lamplight. The Kid moved behind a player and caught Susan's eyes. A moment later, he was alone with her on the other side of a post by the side-wall.

The girl who was Val Easter's daughter—Solo recalled the resemblance he had not been able to place before—clutched at his arm instinctively. "Mr. Strant, I'm so glad you're here. Dummy Fick got in."

The Kid went rigid. He got the story. Dummy had crept in a little after sundown, half delirious with his leg wound. He knew Susan and trusted her, so had slipped to the back door of her uncle's place as she cooked dinner.

"Something's wrong, Mr. Strant," she went on. "Dummy, he knows something terrible. And he's scared, awfully scared. He wanted me to get Val Easter right quick."

The Kid caught her nervous hand. "Did you?"

"I sent a Mex boy I knew. Easter should be getting in any moment. I said for him to come to the house and—"

The Kid edged back toward the shadows and pushed her away from him as he saw a man staring at him over other heads. "You get back to the house right away—pronto prontito, Susan. Your life's in danger. Say nothing to your uncle. Get there—and wait for me! Please!"

She stared a moment, in doubt. Then she nodded and whirled back to the table, smiling at the men. A moment later, she moved toward the rear, laughing with mock gayness as she took the arm of a singing horsetrader. She moved toward a door.

It was just in time. "There's the danged snake who fooled us at the dam, boys!" a beetle-browed gent shouted. "Joe, he's the one who killed your brother!"

It was one of the claim-jumpers, one who had been with the dry-gulching bunch that had tried to trap the Easter band. Others swung around him quickly. They were bitter, orey-eyed, half desperate as they realized their outfits were withering before their eyes. This failure today had them almost locoed.

A gun crashed. The Kid, with that careless-looking double cross-arm draw, had his hardware in his hands. He sent a slug spiking into the ceiling of the crowded room to try to hold them off. Then the place was a turmoil, men ducking beneath tables and chairs, swearing, shouting, and the claim-jumpers closing in from two angles. The Kid sent one of them reeling back with a slug through his boot. He didn't want to kill if he could avoid it. He stepped behind a post.

BUT a bullet from the left creased his left leg in the thigh and he almost went down. He darted to the right as if for the front door, hunched behind an overturned table and triggered twice. A lamp from the ceiling crashed in a spatter of glass and flaming oil. And the quick-witted daring Kid was able to glide down the sidewall in the opposite direction in the ensuing confusion. He almost made a door onto the street of the corner place. But it opened and one of the claim-jumping bunch, already warned, barged in. His shot scorched the Kid's face. Then his gun barrel descended in a glancing blow off the side of the Kid's head.

The stunned Solo staggered. But he managed to slice upward with one of his smoking Colts. The sight ripped the man's cheek open and he barged backward onto a pard entering behind him. The latter wheeled and fled at sight of the Kid.

Summoning his iron nerve, the Kid steadied himself, grabbed the tall gent and got a gun nose in his ribs. "Come on!" he yelled to the others in the place. "Come on—and I'll blast this buzzard's gizzard clean into Hell!"

It stopped them. Using the bleeding gent as a shield, he moved across the end of the room. But he caught the banging on the rear door. Some of the claim-jumpers were already there. He guided his man over to the other wall to a shuttered window. With a quick kick, he bashed the blinds open. Then he shoved his prisoner onto his face and dived through.

He ran rearward, turned to the right in the backyard. Dashed behind another building as yells came from the rear. A bullet chopped into the corner of the place as he turned up the second alley. He came out onto the sidestreet and gambled with a desperate dash across it. He got into the thick shadow of a store's wooden awning as the claim-jumping bunch rounded the corner.

There was a long second. Then one of them sighted a moving figure up the main road and they tore after it, shouting. The Kid glided along down toward the path to Mortimer Bean's house. He was really scared now. He had figured to join the girl there almost immediately. But the gun ruckus had delayed him.

There was some shooting from down by the river. And then fresh yelling as another pack of the claim-jumpers barged into the side road. The Kid came to the dark, tree-canopied path and legged it hobblingly on his hit leg down it. He thought he caught a muffled report. Then he was down by the dark house of Bean.

Even as he hesitated, a figure reeled from the back, face a mass of blood from a hole over one eye. The figure stumbled through a patch of moonlight. It was Dummy Fick, fatally shot this time. The Kid ran toward the front door. He had just distinguished shapes moving from it when the gusty wind parted the tree-tops overhead. The Kid was revealed in the momentary burst of moonlight.

"Git him, Si!" yelled Borbee.

It was Borbee and Logg coming out of Bean's place. And the third blanket-swathed, gagged figure was Susan Easter. Logg leaped off the steps, firing. The deadly cool Kid dropped to a knee, shot twice.

Logg swayed, then buckled slowly at the knees, pawing air as he went down, chest blasted.

Borbee, cornered, found some nerve. He prodded the staring-eyed girl in front of him with a gun in her back. "Take a shot at me, Strant and—she's a pretty girl to kill, ain't she, Strant?" He laughed sneeringly on the night.

The Kid had to back as Borbee guided her toward the ponies ground-anchored beneath a low tree. Borbee had grabbed his hole card. He could kidnap her and have Val Easter at his mercy.

"I've got enough evidence on you, Borbee—" the Kid started to threaten as he desperately waited for a chance for a shot.

And then Borbee flashed a second gun. He held it in his withered hand, supposedly worthless. And that was his mistake, his itch to silence Solo for all time. For he exposed part of his body.

The deadly Kid darted forward, shifted sideward, then triggered with his right hand even as he was in motion. There was a howl of pain from Borbee. The gun in his right, withered hand jumped high in the air. As the moonlight came through again, he stood staring at that blood-running bullet track, the sign of the Kid, on his right hand.

And his nerve ran out as the plucky girl dived into the tall grass near the river. Borbee turned and fled for a horse.

Three times the Kid flung lead. Two-three times, anyway. And then his weapons clicked empty on hollow shells. He had not had time to reload. Borbee was already in a stirrup, moving.

There was a sharp cry. Borbee twisted as he hit the saddle. A tall figure rose from the other side of the road. It was Ben Logg. He had worked his way out of the Kid's bonds.

"You dirty, double-crossin' snake!" Ben howled. And then he shot. Borbee's horse crumpled. The ranchman landed running. There was another shot from Ben's gun. And Borbee sank with a smashed leg.

The Kid had already reloaded. He rushed toward Ben Logg. The latter saw him coming and dropped his smoking weapon. His hand shot up.

"All right—all right, Strant! You got me! 'Member though, I turned state's evidence! I—"

There was a rumble of boots and shouting from up the path. The claim-jumpers were closing in. Then their outcries died. And the stern-faced Val Easter with two hands came riding down through them.

The weary Kid smiled as he sleeved gunpowder from his face. He walked by the sitting, whimpering Borbee, noticing that gun brand on his hand. Borbee would hang all right. The Kid motioned Ben Logg ahead of him. That bandage on Logg's right forearm, which he had worn since the gun duel with the Kid after the faked dry-gulching in the ravine, was unwinding. The Kid stared.

The bared arm showed two bullet tracks, the Kid's own lead brand. The first was from the afternoon of the dry-gulching. The second was the slash Solo had put on the man who had attempted to burn him down that night in front of the riverside barroom. That masked killer had been Ben Logg.

The Kid laughed a little. Then he moved over to Susan who was rising from the grass, motioned over his shoulder toward the approaching Val Easter.

"Come along, miss. I aim to introduce you to your dad!"

THE END

Everybody remembered Haynes — why they were his best pals — they'd gone to school with him —
Only Haynes knew he'd never seen any of them before! And the note from the old miner that brought him back to the town he'd once known was the start of a little party that opened up with

TRIGGERS FOR SIX

Don't miss this action-packed, suspense-filled Complete $2.00 novel by CLIFF CAMPBELL in the new September issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

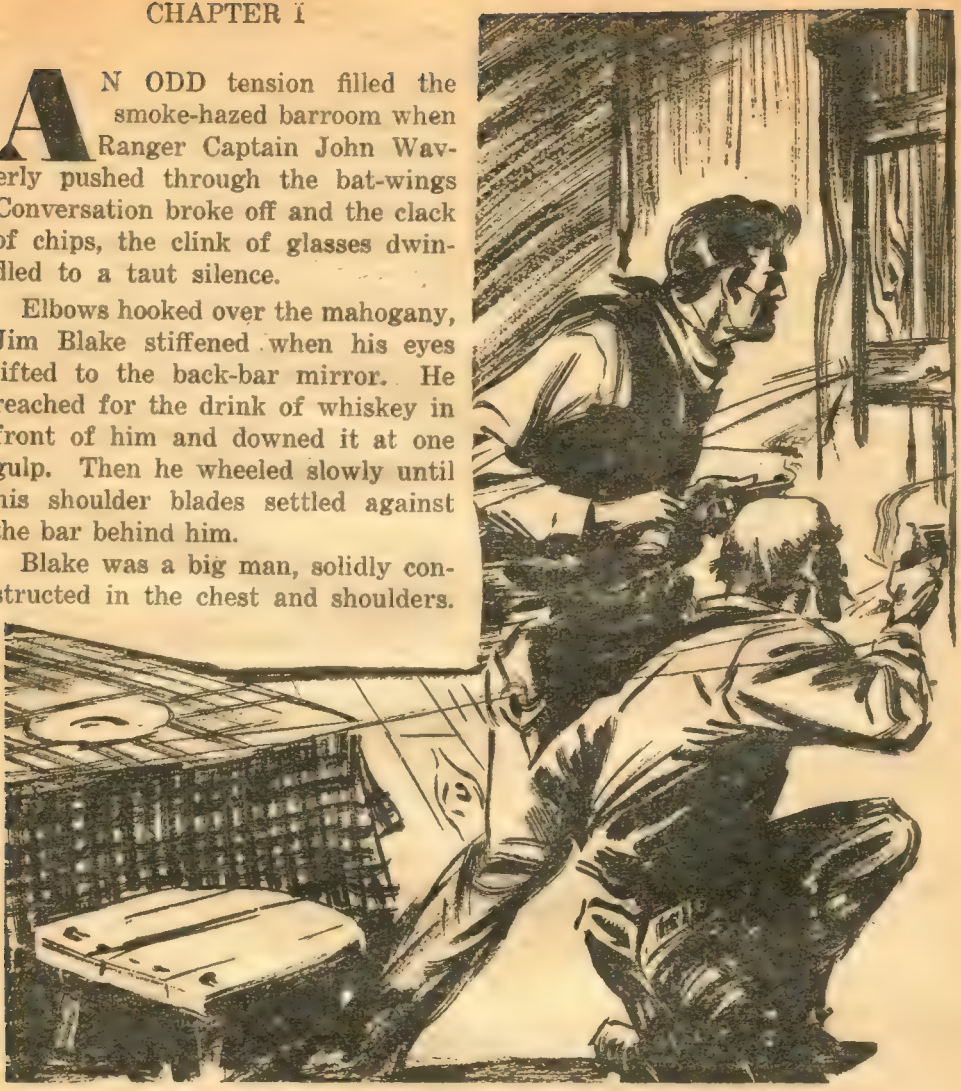
ON ALL STANDS — NOW!

CHAPTER I

AN ODD tension filled the smoke-hazed barroom when Ranger Captain John Waverly pushed through the bat-wings Conversation broke off and the clack of chips, the clink of glasses dwindled to a taut silence.

Elbows hooked over the mahogany, Jim Blake stiffened when his eyes lifted to the back-bar mirror. He reached for the drink of whiskey in front of him and downed it at one gulp. Then he wheeled slowly until his shoulder blades settled against the bar behind him.

Blake was a big man, solidly constructed in the chest and shoulders.



"They're gettin' ready to charge the door!"

LAWMAN'S GUNSMOKE CRUSADE

Jim Blake thought his plan of fixing a feud between Ranger Captain Waverly and himself would bring the desired results—he'd be kicked out of the Rangers, and the bullion bandits would believe he was ready to join them and ride the vengeance trail against his former pards. It was a clever ruse, but when Blake found that Waverly was the bullion bandits' chief. . . .

A COMPLETE NOVEL
by CLIFF CAMPBELL

He had sandy hair, flashing blue eyes and a bulldog jaw. There was a hawk-like look about his rugged, irregular features. He looked tough and was tough. But at this moment while John Waverly paced toward him across the puncheons, a close observer might have detected a hint of worry and doubt in Blake's bloodshot eyes.

For some odd reason the men at the bar shifted aside—sliding their feet in the sawdust away from Blake. And all the while their eyes never left the dark, brooding features of John Waverly. There was something in Waverly's craw tonight. He looked wild and angry. The sense of trouble was very strong and every man in this crowded room drew back to wait for it to break.

"Blake, I'd like a word with you in the office—right now!" Waverly spat out the words as if they had left a bad taste in his mouth.

A faint, sardonic smile broke the rigid composure of Blake's tightly drawn cheeks. "Whatever you've got to say can be said here." There was a thickness in Blake's talk. Waverly noted it and a flush of displeasure muddied his gray-green eyes.

"All right. You asked for it!" Waverly snapped. The crowd noted how his right hand dropped close to the butt of his long-barreled .45 and how his eyes flared with passion when they encountered the Ranger star pinned to Blake's checkered shirt.

At forty-two John Waverly was a slender, wiry man with a nervous energy and a quick temper. He had dark hair, graying at the temples, thick gray-black brows shadowing deep-set gray-green eyes, high cheek-bones and a thin-lipped mouth.

Now he shook his narrow shoulders and his talk came out of the depths of his chest, bitter as gall. "For a long time I've had my doubts about you, Blake. There's been one bullion raid after another in the valley and the Texas Rangers haven't been able to nail the jiggers responsible. The killers have shot down drivers an' shotgun guards without a chance. It's gotten so that Ben Nevins can't hire shotgun guards at any price.

"With that trouble on the border I've had all my men taken away but you. Your job was to run down them bullion raiders. But you haven't done a thing. An' now I know why." With an angry gesture the Ranger captain fished out a sheaf of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Blake. "That's a note I found in your quarters. It was lyin' on the floor beneath the peg where you hang your hat an' coat. You'll notice it's from some friends o' yours."

"What is it, Waverly?" demanded a tall, sleek-haired man with a smooth manner and a dry way of talking. He had pasty skin. A black narrow mustache decorated his thin, upper lip. This was Ben Nevins, owner of the stage line that ran from the gold mines at Hardwick, through Clarion Springs where Blake and Waverly were stationed, to the county seat at Benziger.

"I'll tell you," said the Ranger captain and his tone was harsh and compelling. "This note is addressed to Blake an' it's from the polecats who held up the bank at Benziger last week an' shot down the cashier, gettin' away with ten thousand in cash."

"IT'S a frame-up!" raged Blake, his eyes glinting like polished steel splinters.

"Is it?" snapped Waverly. "Here's

what the note says: 'Blake: Thanks for tippin' us off about that new shipment o' currency to the Benziger bank an' for stayin' outa town while we knocked the place over. Here's the five hundred as agreed.'" Waverly stopped. "That's all."

"I don't know anythin' about that hold-up an' you've got a helluva nerve tryin' to mix me in on that deal," growled Blake. "Some jigger planted that note where you'd find it."

"I think you're lyin'," retorted Waverly. With a smooth easy motion he jerked out his six-gun. "I reckon I'll have to search you for that five hundred this note talks about."

"You ain't searchin' me." Deadliness seemed to creep out from Blake's flared nostrils.

Waverly stepped forward. The muzzle of his .45 dug into Blake's belly. To a big, lantern-jawed man beside the Ranger, Waverly said: "Take his gun, then go through his pockets."

Blake cursed as the man darted in and slipped the Colt from his tied-down scabbard. In a moment the man's hand fished into his trouser pocket. When it emerged there was a flash of greenbacks. The money was passed to Waverly.

"Lot o' money for a Texas Ranger to be packin'," the captain observed, unrolling the bills.

"I had luck at stud tonight," said Blake sullenly, bright flames flickering in his narrowed eyes.

"He's lyin', Waverly!" someone yelled from the gaming tables. "Blake dropped almost a hundred bucks tonight."

The Ranger captain's body quivered. "There's more than four hundred dollars here in this roll." He paused, then, while he brought out a wrinkled sheet of paper with a long list of numbers on it. For a moment he appeared to consult and compare the greenbacks with the numbers on the paper in his hand. "You're pretty clever!" he said, a brutal sense of frustation twisting his talk. "The serial numbers on these bills don't tally with those stolen from the Benziger bank. You weren't takin' any chances o' havin' any o' of the stolen money traced back to you. Where did you exchange that dinero?"

"I tell you the money's my own—from wages an' from my winnin's at poker and roulette durin' the past week."

"An' I tell you you're lyin'!"

Gun palmed, the muzzle pointed straight at Blake's belly, Waverly stepped forward. Suddenly his left hand flicked out like a striking snake. It fastened on the pointed star which draped Blake's left shirt-pocket. There was a rending, tearing sound as the captain ripped the badge off and flung it to the floor.

"You're through in the Rangers, Blake."

"Yeah?" Blake was grinning. There was no friendliness in him, no cringe. Whiskey thickened his voice. "What am I supposed to say?"

"I could break you for this," resumed Waverly. "Lock you up on suspicion an' hold you for further evidence until we round up the sidewinders who pulled that bank robbery."

Blake's control slipped and rage stormed through his brain. His eyes bored into the captain. "I don't know what your game is, Waverly. Somebody framed me. Mebbe it was you. You say I'm all washed up with the Rangers. That suits me fine. But remember this, from now on I'm makin' it hot for every man that wears the

star of a Texas Ranger an' you in particular."

GRIM silence hung over the barroom for the space of several seconds. Into that stillness sawed the deep, aroused breathing of these two men. Killing lights danced in Blake's eyes. He was solid and tough and contemptuous as he faced the Ranger captain.

"Your threats don't scare me," said Waverly stiffly. "I've got a hunch you're workin' with the polecats who've been raidin' the bullion shipments from the Golden King mine in the hills. Mebbe that's why you haven't had any luck bringin' 'em in. The only ones who know when the stage is carryin' gold is Ben Nevins, Jack Early, the mine superintendent, an' the Rangers. I know Jack and Ben wouldn't talk. If I was sure you were tippin' off those shipments I'd lock you up pronto as an accomplice to the cold-blooded killing of every stage driver an' shotgun guard that lost his life in those recent raids!"

A crimson haze of anger fogged Blake's vision. "You got anythin' else to say?" he demanded.

"Yeah," said Waverly, drawing himself up to his full six feet. A strange nervous tension clung to the Ranger captain—the same tension that had gripped him since that mysterious band of killers had been terrorizing the county with their daring raids. "I'm givin' you just forty-eight hours to clear out of Clarion Springs. If I see you here after that, go for your cutter."

"Thanks for the tip," said Blake and struck without warning.

Blake moved lithely and swiftly like the smooth, effortless spring of a panther. He buried his left hand in Waverly's middle. Breath wheezed from the captain as he doubled over. The next instant there was a blurred streak, the sickening "thock" of knuckles meeting solid bone and flesh. Waverly's head was wrenched upward as Blake's fist crashed against his jaw. He went over backwards, struck the floor with a room-shaking jolt and lay still. He was out cold.

Blake dusted off the knuckles of his right hand. His shoulders stirred to the grim and turbulent rush of passion. Slowly, then, he let his glance slide out across the room. He saw how Ben Nevins and every other man in the saloon stood tense and immobile. Narrowed eyes bracketed him with a strict and unrelenting distaste.

Suddenly Blake laughed. There was a reckless, contemptuous ring to it. Then he moved across the room toward the batwings and boldly presented his back as a fair target to all these hostile men. The doors slipped wide to the thrust of his shoulders. And all that while no one stirred and no one spoke.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS late afternoon. Heat and sun and wind scorched the rutted streets of Clarion Springs. But in this dirty cantina at the far end of town the atmosphere was cool and musky. The taint of stale whiskey and sawdust filled the room.

A motley crowd of range drifters and assorted hardcases filled the gloomy interior. Every man here had the grim, furtive look of one who was afraid of his back trail.

At a table in the rear Jim Blake sat slouched behind a half-empty quart bottle of whiskey. There was a stubble of black beard on his cheeks and jaw. His eyes were red-rimmed

and bloodshot. His hair was a tangled, unruly mop.

The moon-faced barkeep glanced toward a nearby table around which three hard-faced men sat, then jerked his head imperceptibly toward Blake and grinned. One of those men, russet-haired with greenish eyes deep-set below a narrow forehead, nodded surlily. Afterward the other two men at that table turned to regard Blake with a steady, speculative attention.

Blake was apparently oblivious of the interest he was arousing. His shaking hand tipped the bottle and filled the whiskey glass. Suddenly his head lifted. A ragged, tousle-haired button had entered the cantina, a bundle of fresh newspapers tucked under his arm.

At a curt motion from Blake the boy came over and dropped a copy of the newspaper on the scarred table. Blake flipped a coin into the button's hand and waved him away.

There it was! Spread across the front page of the weekly Clarion Springs Sentinel. The sensational story of Jim Blake's dismissal from the Texas Rangers.

JIM BLAKE FIRED FROM RANGERS

Captain Waverly Hints Blake Working With Owlhoot Clan; Suspected of Being Involved in Bullion Raids!

Blake plunged his eyes down the long column of newsprint, reading the editor's terse comments about the entire affair. And while he read, rage filled his face with a surging crimson tide of blood.

The three tough-looking hombres at the other table stopped the button long enough to purchase a copy of the Sentinel. Their eyes scanned the front page hungrily, then swung obliquely toward the ex-Ranger.

Blake came to the end of the story. His right hand clawed at the flimsy sheets, crumpling them into an ink-smeared ball. He lifted the glass of whiskey to his lips, downed the contents at one gulp, then smashed the glass against the wall.

A subdued murmur of satisfaction issued from the other table. At some silent signal all three men rose and sauntered idly toward Blake.

"Not such good readin'," eh, Blake?" said the red-haired gent, his green eyes nagging at the ex-Ranger.

Blake looked up. His skin drew tight across his cheekbones. "What's it to you?"

The red-haired man cursed softly but the hatchet-faced gent on his right broke in swiftly: "The forty-eight hours are almost up. You leavin' town?"

BLAKE leaned back in his chair. His blunt fingers worried the whiskey bottle in front of him. His features were granite-hard.

"I'm stayin'."

"Suppose Waverly comes here lookin' for you?" asked the third man, squat and bull-necked with close-cropped blond hair.

A swift, turbulent appetite bannered from Blake's eyes. "I'll kill him," he said without expression.

The red-haired man's eyes drew shut into a thin, cunning line. "That's strong talk, friend."

"Waverly framed me outa the Rangers," Blake rasped, his talk cold as ice. "Mebbe he's the jigger that's been tippin' off those raiders about the bullion shipments. Don't know what his game is, but I'm stayin' till I notch my gun-sights on him."

The three men moved closer.

Blake regarded them warily and without any show of friendliness. Uninvited, they pulled up chairs and sat down. The red-haired man pushed his gaunt-featured face close to Blake and his talk dropped to a guttural whisper.

"How'd you like to hand your dew claws on some easy money an' at the same time make things hot for your friend Waverly?"

Conflicting emotions seemed to struggle for dominance behind the ex-Ranger's bloodshot eyes. He considered this offer for a long moment then replied: "What's the proposition?" His voice was spare and even, not eager, not disinterested.

"You claim you got a raw deal from the Rangers," reminded the red-haired gent. "Mebbe we could use a feller like you who's handy with a shootin' iron an' ain't afraid to use it." He stopped, his eyes boring into Blake.

"Go on," urged Blake tonelessly. "You gents interested in cattle?"

"Bullion, my friend. Gold bullion," hissed the red-haired man. "That surprise you?" Blake shrugged, his eyes remaining bland, though within him his stomach muscles started to quiver.

"There's another shipment due to go through from the Golden King mine an' smelters soon." This was the hatchet-faced man talking. "We got ways o' findin' out just when. You with us?"

Silence, thin and dangerous, dropped like a thin veil upon the table. Jim Blake weighed that silence with a strange frenzy humming through his veins. He saw how closely these men were watching him. Then he grinned—a tough, crooked grin and pushed the bottle toward them.

"I'm your huckleberry, gents!" he murmured.

"Now you're talkin'," grunted the hatchet-faced man and took a big swig out of the bottle. "When that next bullion stage goes through, we'll hit it. You'll stand to collect a nice juicy cut an' at the same time you'll be greasin' the skids for Waverly. One more raid an' he'll be fired from the Rangers."

"That's enough palaver," cut in the redhead. His eyes rested on Blake's face. "Meet us at ten o'clock where the north trail forks an' cuts toward Solitary Mesa."

"I'll be there," Blake promised grimly and watched the three men rise and swagger out of the cantina.

AFTER they had gone Blake remained at the table. He looked calm and unmoved. But his blood was boiling with a strange elation.

The plan had worked! Desperate and foolhardy as it had seemed it was bearing fruit. He'd had plenty to drink. His eyes were bloodshot and red. He looked like he was drunk but behind that stubble of beard, behind those bleared eyes his mind was working at a furious speed.

He was remembering John Waverly and all the men who had given their lives in those bloody raids on the bullion stages. The savage attacks threatened to close the Golden King mine and force Ben Nivens out of business. And in addition the reputation of the Texas Rangers was at stake.

As week after week had passed with the same dismal failure awarding every effort of Waverly and Blake to stamp out the raids, the Ranger captain had grown steadily more irritable and distraught. Word had come from Central Ranger head-

quarters that unless some definite results were obtained at once, John Waverly's resignation would be expected.

And on top of that had come the trouble along the border between Texas cowmen and Mexican rancheros. Rustling had broken out. There'd been several shooting frays, and Waverly had had to send every available man down there except Blake. And it had been Blake's job to patrol an area more than three hundred miles square.

Twice he'd been away on manhunts when bullion raids had occurred. The third time he'd trailed the stage all the way through the badlands, then pitched in when the attack was made by the masked bandits. He'd killed two of the raiders before he was knocked out by a slug. Then, when he'd come to he'd found the stage team nibbling at bunch grass, the driver and shotgun guard dead, the bullion gone and the two renegades he'd shot beyond all chance of recovery. And so had vanished any possibility of their talking and revealing the identity of the leader of the raiders.

Finally, desperation had compelled Jim Blake to broach a daring plan to Waverly. Waverly was to pretend to discover damning evidence that would show Blake was in league with long-riders. The finger of suspicion would point to his possible complicity in the bullion raids. Blake would be fired from the Rangers, his badge of office taken from him.

After that, with disgrace hanging upon his head, it would be Blake's task to frequent the cantinas and honkatonks that cluttered the tougher section of Clarion Springs. He was to keep his eyes and ears open to pick up information about the bullion raiders. By some lucky chance the renegades might be among the lot of hard-faced gun-slicks that infested the town—men with dim pasts and well-greased holsters.

Using the motive of revenge against Waverly for firing him out of the Rangers, Blake hoped to win a place with the raiders. He'd be tough and filled with black hatred for Waverly and the Rangers—eager to square accounts at any cost.

Well, he'd done that! The die was cast even though Waverly had objected on the grounds that the odds were ten to one against Blake's ever surviving such a hell-hawk masquerade. But Blake had seen how worry had torn the Ranger captain, turning him savage and irritable. He seemed like a different man. He'd lost considerable weight in the past month. His cheeks had grown gaunt. Even his hair seemed to be grayer than it had been.

Waverly had consented. Then had followed that grim scene in the crowded barroom with Blake being shorn of his star. But now he was getting somewhere. Unless this was a deadly trap—and the thought brought a cold chill sliding up and down his spine—Jim Blake was about to take the first step toward wiping out the masked raiders.

Somewhere—either at the mine or among Ben Nevins' assorted muleskinners—leaks occurred. The knowledge got out to the long-riders when the stage was to carry bullion. Perhaps, tonight another such shipment was scheduled to leave the smelters. And if an attack was planned, Blake would have to get away in time to warn Waverly to round up a posse to capture the renegades!

CHAPTER III

THE night was dark and star-brilliant when Jim Blake arrived at the appointed rendezvous. The fork was deserted. Blake kept his right hand near his Colt, half-expecting an ambush.

He had been waiting twenty minutes when he heard the swift rataplan of hoofs. Senses acutely alert he catalogued the sound as coming from two horsemen. And he was correct. A pair of riders cantered around a bend in the trail and hauled up suddenly.

"Blake?" queried one man warily.

"Yeah."

Blake studied the riders, noting that the redhead was missing. "Where's your friend?" he demanded idly.

"He'll meet us at the hideout," said the hatchet-faced man. "That's where we're headed. Somethin' tells me we'll have work to do tonight. Let's ride!"

Blake nodded and touched spurs to his blue roan. It did not escape his attention that the hatchet-faced man took the lead while the shorter renegade with the bull-like neck and close-cropped hair fell in behind the ex-Ranger. They weren't trusting him too far. Until he'd proved his colors under fire, they were riding with their guns light in their holsters and ready for anything.

The trail lifted sharply from the stage road, threading through a tangled maze of gullies and ravines that gradually gave way to sheer, rock-walled canyons. At times they rode through grassy parks and thick stands of timber. And then they'd be skylined on some high, rocky mesa with the shadow of other saw-toothed buttes towering above them in menacing dark blots. But the hatchet-faced man never hesitated. He picked his way unerringly in that sea of canyon and pothole.

At last they emerged from a long corridor of pines and found themselves in a wide open glade. At the end of the draw a rough-hewn cabin shouldered against a high palisade that jabbed its naked pinnacles at the stars. The dull gleam of light coming from within the shack was suddenly doused.

"It's all right, Dutch!" called out the hatchet-faced man and rode straight toward the cabin.

The door was flung open. A man emerged, plastering himself flat against the wall, the dark bulk of a gun in his fist. The three riders came on and dismounted before him.

"You're actin' like a spooked steer," said the man behind Blake.

The man against the cabin let out a long breath. "Can't take any chances. Let's get inside."

Blake preceded the hatchet-faced hombre into the cabin. And the man who'd been inside the shack struck a match and lit the lamp again, setting it down on a rough plank table. A half dozen old packing cases strewn about the room served as chairs. Two double bunks lined the far wall.

"Dutch" proved to be the redheaded member of the gang. The hatchet-faced man turned to him and asked bluntly: "You see the boss?"

"Yeah. He got word they're shippin' ten thousand in bullion on the stage tonight. They're sendin' a dummy stage through first. That was Ben Nevins' idea. The regular stage'll follow with the dinero.

"How will we handle the bullion? Same as last time?" inquired the squat renegade.

"Sure," said Dutch. "Take what

we can with us an' cache the rest in some brush pocket until we can come back to it."

"Who's ridin' shotgun guard on the second stage?"

Dutch grunted and swung to face Blake, his eyes filled with a wicked and sardonic amusement. "Waverly's taken the job."

"Waverly?" Blake repeated. His throat tightened. For a clock-tick of time all the color drained out of his face. Then he fought for self-control, forcing his facial muscles to flatten out into hard, immobile planes. "Leave him to me," he said, his talk very rough but nevertheless strained. "I'll kill him."

"Sure, pal. You can have him," said Dutch. His gray-green eyes were full of guile and cunning.

SUDDENLY he laughed. And then the others were smiling, a silent deadliness flaring out from their twisted mouths. Something got into the eyes of all these men—something opaque and chill and ominous. Then it passed, and their features resolved once more into the grim, hard masks Blake knew so well.

But after that he knew no peace. Did they suspect the ruse he was trying to work on them? And were they deliberately leading him into a murder trap? That was something Blake couldn't determine.

A slow, chill wind of disaster blew against Blake. His nerves began to jump. The renegades were outlining their plans for the raid. Blake was listening with only a portion of his attention. The rest of him was throbbing with rigid apprehension.

What madness had prompted Waverly to ride as shotgun guard? Earlier that evening before he'd gone out to keep his appointment with the renegades, Blake had stalked through the rear streets of Clarion Springs to meet the Ranger captain in his darkened office. It was then he'd revealed his success in getting in with the raiders. Waverly had agreed to sit tight until Blake got word to him of the outlaws' plans. At the time Waverly hadn't known if a bullion shipment was planned for that evening. He'd still been waiting for word from the Golden King mine.

That information must have come right after Blake left his office. Perhaps something had turned up that had forced Waverly to substitute himself as a shotgun guard. Or, the move might have been compelled by Ben Nevins' inability to hire a man to take the run through.

But whatever had been the Ranger Captain's motives, the man was in a tight spot. Violence rode the night wind. And unless Blake could somehow elude the renegades and intercept the stage before it reached the spot determined upon for the raid, Waverly was in grave danger of losing his life. For, Blake knew how these men attacked. There was no warning. No command to get down from the stage with hands lifted while the bullion was unloaded. Nothing like that. There was one wild, furious plunge with guns blazing and no quarter asked or given.

Dutch's rasping voice broke into Blake's somber reflections. "You listenin', Blake?" Blake nodded in surly impatience. "We'll hit the stage at the bend in the trail where it comes outa Jack-Knife Canyon. An' remember, the minute we come outa the brush start flippin' hammer."

"I get you," murmured Blake, dry-voiced, unable to rid himself of the choking sensation in his windpipe. Somehow he had to get away and intercept the stage. But right now it was impossible. He was hemmed in

here by men who watched him with a relentless attention. "When do I meet the boss o' this outfit?"

A bright light glittered in the redhead's eyes. "Any reason why you'd like to meet him?"

"Just curiosity. Like to know who I'm workin' for."

Dutch appeared to consider that. Afterward, a hawk-like care planed out his rugged cheeks. "You might see him tonight at the shack if we pull off the raid without a hitch. If it's your cut you're worried about, you'll get yours. Won't he Berson?"

The hatchet-faced man grinned. "Sure, it'll be a quick pay-off."

The air in this room was suddenly stagnant. Blake found it hard to breathe. Warning prickled the back of his neck. He was plagued once more by a vague fear that the outlaws had penetrated his masquerade. But he couldn't be sure. It was just a feeling—a nagging sensation that gave him no rest. He kept thinking of Waverly and of the way the hatchet-faced man had spoken of a quick payoff, and he had his chance to wonder if that payoff would be in money—or in lead!

CHAPTER IV

THE four horsemen streamed silently through the timber. They were working down toward the foothills. Another quarter hour and they'd intercept the stage road near Jack-Knife Canyon, a narrow pass that had been cut through solid walls of rock. At the point where the pass splayed out into a little park and the road widened again, the wayside was dotted with thick chaparral and scattered boulders. An excellent place for a hold-up and one that had been used by the gang once before.

All during that long ride down from the hideout Jim Blake had kept his eyes keened for the slightest break in the renegades' watchfulness. But no opportunity presented itself for him to break away.

At length, Dutch pulled up in a thick stand of brush. Blake saw they were on a little knoll above the stage road which wound like a dull ribbon out of the yawning black abyss of Jack-Knife Canyon.

Blake was eaten by slow fires of despair. The trap he'd meant to set for the outlaws had turned into a trap for himself and John Waverly. It was fight or die now. And grimly Blake resolved that he'd go out with guns blazing.

The minute the signal for the charge was given, he'd plunge out of concealment with the rest. Somehow he'd try to yell a warning to Waverly, then he'd turn his guns on the outlaws who sat their horses in a tight circle about him.

They'd been waiting twenty minutes when the far-off echo of pounding hoofs came to them. Blake felt his pulse quicken. Dutch lifted a hand and hissed:

"That's probably the dummy stage. We'll let it go by."

The thunder of rattling wheels and churning hoofs grew louder. Suddenly a swaying stage swept out of the canyon, slithered around the bend and struck off toward the west. A huge cloud of dust plumed up into the night air. Trace chains jangling, big-shouldered teams leaning into their collars, the Concord roared out of sight.

Ten minutes went by. Minutes that were a torture of troubled unease for Blake. He loosened the .45 in his holster and wet his lips with his tongue. Once he caught Dutch watching him with a strange, calculating intensity. As their eyes met Dutch grinned. It was a slow, avaricious gesture, then

the renegade dropped his gaze. Again that chill wind of peril shook Blake's shoulder blades.

Into the stillness crept the beat of hoofs again. The rock walls of the pass took up that sound and magnified it a hundred times. The bullion stage was coming!

"Get ready!" grated Dutch and unsheathed his Colt.

Blake and the others did likewise. The clatter of steel-rimmed wheels skidding off rock and shale, the beat of hoofs became deafening. The stage lurched out of the pass. Dutch lifted his left hand and spurred his mount out of the chaparral.

Down the short slope the four horsemen plunged. The stage was twenty yards away on their left. The renegades hit the road in a cloud of dust.

"Look out, John!" Blake yelled. "It's a trap!"

The shuddering bellow of guns drowned out Blake's strident cry. He had a fleeting glimpse of Dutch and the others around him, red spears of death crawling from the guns in their fists. He saw the driver strain at the reins, saw Waverly throw the scattergun to his shoulder for a shot.

A six-gun spoke on Blake's left. Waverly stood up, swaying on the careening stage, then fell. Beside him the driver uttered a shrill yell of agony and pitched off into space.

BLAKE wheeled his mount sharply. And there was Dutch waiting for him on his big black Morgan horse, a wide grin splitting his evil face, crimson jets of flame pouring from the throbbing Colts in his fist.

"Here's hell, sucker!" said Dutch.

Bullets swarmed over Blake. He was dimly conscious of the other outlaws swinging to box him in a tightening circle of flying metal. A bullet tore into the fleshy part of his shoulder. Another ripped a shallow furrow across his cheek. Beyond him, in the middle of the road, one of the stage horses uttered a trumpeting scream of fright. Then the whole team bolted in wild panic.

Blake's big Colt now added its heavy roar to the pounding din of gunfire. He jabbed the roan with his spurs and sent the animal charging toward the outlaws. A deadly wave of muzzle flame swept across the gloom to meet him. Bullets whispered past him like the sibilant hum of angry hornets. Blake's weapon frothed redly. He saw Dutch come into line, his gun chattering, then wheel sharply as Blake's first shot sped wild.

Then Blake was close upon the renegades. The bull-necked man jerked up his .45 and squeezed the trigger. The flash of that report blinded Blake for an instant before his own throbbing iron laid a wicked, answering lash of flame upon the outlaw.

The bull-necked man lifted his arms, all the life washing out of him, then flipped from the saddle. Blake came on, never halting his furious rush. The hatchet-faced man tried to block his path. But the roan slammed full tilt into the other horse. For a breathless moment the roan and the other animal were lost in a threshing tangle. Then the roan bucked clear under Blake's spur-lashing and shot toward the runaway stage.

Behind Blake, Dutch uttered a savage yell. Six-guns howled their song of violence. The earth shook to the beat of hoofs as Dutch and the other man set out after Blake. Suddenly Blake was running parallel with the fear-crazed team. He turned once and emptied his gun toward the dark

blurs of the two renegades, then ducked low in the saddle.

Another volley of six-gun fire ripped the night apart. The roan lurched in mid-stride. Blake felt the animal's muscles go slack and knew the roan had been hit. Desperately he freed his feet from the oxbows and flung himself out of the saddle toward the straining six-horse stage span.

The roan collapsed and went down in a cloud of dust. Blake catapulted through space. He landed with a solid shock upon the near wheeler. Hands groping frantically for a hold upon the heavy collar, he hauled himself flat on the bay's back.

Wind whipped sharply at him. Dust plumed upward in a choking cloud. Bullets whined through the air, or slammed with smashing impact into the wooden panels of the Concord. The straining horses were racing in full rout. The coach swayed perilously on protesting springs as it slithered around bends in the narrow road. And behind the stage, spurring their mounts wildly, rode Dutch and the hatchet-faced outlaw.

Sprawled full-length upon the back of the big bay wheeler, Blake lifted up and tried to peer through the gloom. A gust of breeze winnowed out the pall of dust. And what Blake saw sent his heart leaping into his mouth.

The road at this spot traversed a high ledge, overlooking a steep, sloping canyon. Even as Blake glanced toward the trail, he heard the muffled explosion of a gun. The horse ahead of him stumbled and went down. Blake's mount piled up against its fallen mate. The rest of the team went plunging madly on as the skidding wheels of the Concord slid toward the bottom of the gorge.

Horses screamed in agony and terror. Wood splintered and crashed as the vehicle bounced and jolted down the shale-strewn slant. Blake was flung outward through space. The ground rushed up to meet him, jarred him heavily, then smashed him into oblivion.

CHAPTER V

PAIN, seeping in hot, miasmic waves through every inch of his body, brought Jim Blake back to consciousness. His eyelids flipped open and showed him nothing. Then he realized that a thick fog of dust obscured his vision.

He was lying on his back, wedged against a boulder. When the air cleared he discovered that he was still on the canyon slope. The boulder had stopped his headlong fall toward the gorge. He moved gingerly and felt a throb in the middle of his back. His shoulder ached where the bullet had torn through the flesh.

He rolled over on his hands and knees. Above him lay the splintered remains of the Concord impaled against another huge rock. And tangled in a mess of gear and harness threshed the stage team. Two of the powerful horses had been crushed beneath the body of the vehicle.

Blake started climbing laboriously. But he hadn't gone a dozen steps before he came upon Waverly. The Ranger captain was sprawled on his side near the ruined stage. He groaned and stirred weakly as Blake approached. Blake helped raise him to a sitting position, the young Ranger's fingers contacting a wet, sticky trail of blood running from the older man's scalp.

"You blasted fools!" raged Waverly thickly. He trembled, trying to shake Blake's hand away. His eyes rolled feverishly.

"Waverly! It's Blake—Jim Blake! Don't you know me? You're talkin' outa your head!" Once, twice, Blake's right hand moved in a short, snapping arc, the palm striking the Ranger captain's cheeks.

Waverly's body straightened. He tipped up his head. In the pale bright light of the rising moon his skin looked gray-green. His eyes held an odd, turbulent gleam. Slowly, then, the tautness drained from his muscles.

"Blake!" he husked. There was relief in Waverly's tone but his eyes remained strange, the lids hooded. "What happened?"

"Couldn't get word to you in time where the raid was gonna take place," muttered Blake. "When the jiggers hit the stage at the exit from Jack-Knife Canyon, I was with 'em. Tried to shout a warning to you. Reckon you didn't hear me. I saw you get tagged by a bullet—" Blake broke off as Waverly growled an oath, his eyes turning dark and brilliant—"then all hell broke loose. The jiggers had me trapped but I broke through. My horse was hit, though I managed to get outa the saddle and jump on one o' the stage horses. I was still hangin' on when stage an' all went off the road. I figgered we were both goners. Guess them raiders figgered the same 'cause they didn't bother comin' down to investigate."

"Damn their murderous souls!" Waverly raged, his voice oddly shrill. "They've outwitted us once more."

"Mebbe not," replied Blake thinly. The surface of his craggy cheeks was bleak with anger. "They didn't get the bullion this time." He jerked a thumb toward the stage boot which had broken loose in the wreck and now lay shattered fifty feet away from them. Several of the golden ingots glittered in the moonlight.

For a moment Waverly's eyes shuttled to Blake, hard and searching and speculative. Blake couldn't fathom that glance.

"It still don't get us the gents who staged the raid," the Ranger captain grumbled.

Jim Blake's mouth split in a tough grin. "I wouldn't bet on that. Don't forget I was with them buskies tonight. They took me to their hideout. If you're well enough to ride, I'm in favor o' takin' a pasear into the hills to round 'em up. There were four men in that raid, includin' myself. I drilled one gent. That leaves two an' the feller they call boss whom I haven't had the pleasure o' meetin'. I figger we'll find 'em all at the hideout."

JOHN WAVERLY struggled to his feet. His face was twisted with pain but he said gruffly: "Let's ride. Mebbe your masquerade will pay off, after all!"

"You fit enough to travel?"

"I stopped a six-gun slug with my ribs an' had my scalp creased when the stage toppled off the road. But that ain't half enough to keep me from goin' after a bunch o' skunks that are badly in need o' killin'."

"Now you're talkin'," said Blake and began to shove fresh loads into his warm Colt.

While the two men wasted a few precious minutes fashioning crude bandages, torn from strips of their shirts, for their bullet wounds, Waverly remarked gloomily: "Looks like I'm gonna be handicapped. I haven't a hogleg. Must have lost it in the melee around the stage."

Blake made a grimace. "Tough luck. An' I'm just packin' one Peacemaker." He shrugged. "Reckon we'll have to make the best of it."

Fortunately for the two Rangers,

the lead horses in the span had not been injured in the wreck. Working swiftly and deftly with a long-bladed knife which he carried in a scabbard at his waist, Blake cut the two powerful bays loose and led them up the slope to the road. There the two men mounted and struck straight across country toward the rugged uplands.

At the end of an hour's silent but steady travel they came to the thick stack of timber surrounding the little clearing in which the outlaws' cabin had been set up. The moonlight helped Blake pick out prominent landmarks along the dim trail which he'd seen earlier in the evening on the way down from the hideout with Dutch and the others. He'd filed those landmarks away at the back of his brain and only his keen memory of them enabled them to find the cabin so quickly.

The two men sat their horses at the edge of the glade, noting how moonlight filled the wide open space before the structure in a brilliant pool of milky light. From this distance the shack appeared deserted. No illumination came from the front window. But the nickering of a horse from the shadows along the side of the cabin drew Blake's questing glance in that direction and showed him two tethered horses.

"They're here," said Blake eagerly.

Waverly nodded somberly. "Only two horses, though. That means the boss you spoke of hasn't shown up." He gave Blake a strange, enigmatic smile.

"Let's move," urged Blake impatiently.

"Wait! No sense in takin' chances. From inside the cabin they can see us a lot better than we can see them. Once we get into that cleared area we'll make a damn good target. Besides, you forget I'm without a cutter."

"That's right." Grim, dark purpose glinted in Blake's eyes. "You stay here, then. I'll play it solo."

Waverly grunted: "I've a better idea. Give me time to circle through the woods to the back of the cabin. The brush grows right close to the rear wall at that point. There may be a window I can enter. I'll get inside somehow or stir up a racket to draw their attention, while you hit 'em from the front!"

"Good idea," Blake assented after a moment. "But be careful."

The Ranger captain nodded, kicked his mount's flanks and vanished through the timber aisles. Blake dismounted, ground-tied the bay and began working through the brush until he was at a spot directly in line with the angle made by the side and rear walls of the cabin. Then he waited, feeling the seconds tick on with a sensation that was like blood seeping along his veins drop by drop. His nerves were jumpy and action was a singing call in his brain.

TIME dragged on slowly. Still there was no disturbance at the rear of the shack. From his place of concealment Blake could see that a blanket had been draped across the front window. This covering shut out all but a thin sliver of yellow lamplight.

That was all. There was no sound. Only silence, pregnant with the threat of violence and death. The strain of waiting sucked Blake dry. He felt the skin on his cheekbones tighten, and the palm of his gun-hand grew moist with sweat.

What had happened to Waverly? Had he walked into a trap? Had he been surprised at the rear of the cab-

in before he had an opportunity to start a ruckus? And were the raiders even now waiting for Blake to show himself in the moonlight-washed area in front of the shack so they could blast him down with hot lead?

These questions put a knawing pressure between Jim Blake's shoulder blades. Cold perspiration greased his forehead. Then his mouth set in a thin, hard wedge. He wouldn't wait any longer!

He broke from the timber and ran at a half-crouch toward the cabin. At each stride he expected six-guns to open up on him. His muscles crawled in anticipation of the biting surge of lead. But no shot shattered the stillness, and he gained the wall without being challenged.

For a moment he flattened himself between the window and the door, his eyes raking the clearing, ears attuned to catch the slightest sound of movement from within. But he could hear nothing—nothing but the wild and frantic beating of his own heart.

Blake's fingers tightened around the weapon in his fist. He backed off from the cabin and prepared to charge the door. It didn't look very strong. He was counting on the solid thrust of his weight to send the portal crashing inward. After that he'd be inside and his gun would have to do all the talking.

Bunched muscles exploded into violent action as Blake slammed his shoulders against the door. Too late he detected the crack of light coming from the interior and realized the door had been pushed open by someone. He tried to halt his forward momentum and could not. His shoulders struck the wooden panels. The door swung inward on squeaking hinges, and he followed it, knocked completely off-balance.

Blake landed flat on the floor in a blaze of lamplight. After that, things began to happen too quickly for him to understand them. He had a swift, horrible glimpse of Dutch standing by the fireplace, two guns jutting from his fist, a wicked smile drawing down his lip corners. Five paces away on Dutch's left stood the hatchet-faced hombre, killing lust graying his cheeks as a long-barreled .45 swung into line of Blake's chest.

And squarely in the middle of the room stood a weird apparition that filled Blake with a haunting bewilderment and dread. The man looked like John Waverly. But his face was savage with a burning cruelty and the gun in his hand was pointed straight at Blake. Then that man was saying through flat lips:

"Here's a surprise, Blake!"

Then Blake was rolling to one side in a desperate, straining motion as the cabin rocked to the throbbing roar of Colts. Cherry-red pencils of gunflame stabbed across the room. Dust and splinters sprang from the floor where Blake had been sprawled. He twisted around, threw himself up on one elbow, and his .45 began to pitch a crimson streamer toward the hatchet-faced man.

A ROUND hole abruptly appeared in the middle of the outlaw's forehead. His eyes turned sightless. His cheeks whitened to a chalky hue. He fell against Dutch, spoiling the latter's aim as two more shots sped close to the Ranger.

Then an amazing thing occurred. A door at the rear of the cabin opened. Blake caught a fleeting glimpse of the dark area of a small room before a strange apparition staggered into the lamplight. It was Waverly! Yet, Waverly was only a

few paces off, shooting at him! There were two Waverlys! Something was wrong! Blake's head began to spin.

But this man who emerged into the front room was a sickly, emaciated version of the tough, stringy Ranger captain. Like a silent wraith, that frail shape darted to the figure of the dead renegade and grabbed up the discarded six-gun.

And now that other man who was also Waverly heard the slithering sound of boots behind him and whirled. A harsh cry issued from his lips when he saw the figure a few feet away from him. A reddish streak washed from his gun muzzle. The man that looked so much like Waverly gasped and fell on his face.

Waverly pivoted back toward Blake. Blake rolled across the puncheons. A slug from Dutch's chattering Colt tore into his ribs and drew the hot blood welling from his side. Nausea gripped Blake in heavy, beating waves. He gritted his teeth against the pain. Everything was crazy here! Waverly was shooting at him and he couldn't understand why. And that other man— But some hard instinct of self-preservation gave Blake the strength to meet the grim challenge.

Blake's gun swung into line. Waverly's big weapon canted down upon Blake at the same moment. There were two flashing reports. But Blake's shot shaded Waverly's. Lead whispered harmlessly past Blake. But his own slug drilled a bull's-eye in the bridge of Waverly's nose.

Now there was Dutch advancing toward him with murder in his face. The gun was heavy in Blake's grip. Desperately he tried to bring it up for one more shot. Things started to go black.

A heavy report shook the cabin walls. Blake's swaying frame trembled, but there was no answering bite of lead. And when he opened his eyes, there was Dutch, clutching at his belly and crumbling to the floor. And twisted on his side, smoke dribbling from a slanting gun bore, was that strange, wasted-looking man who looked so much like Waverly.

Jim Blake struggled to his feet, fighting against the agony of pain and exhaustion. He kept his .45 palmed, not sure of his ground. The other man was grinning. He let his gun slip from his fingers. Slowly he straightened, pushed against the wall and let his body rest there.

"Howdy, Jim! Glad to see you!" the man whispered.

"Waverly?" husked Blake, not understanding this. His eyes left this smiling man and traveled to the floor where John Waverly lay still in death.

The man against the wall made a weary gesture with his arm. "It's got you puzzled, Jim. But I can explain. That's Ed Waverly you see on the floor—my twin brother—an' as black an' crooked as they come. He was the leader o' the renegades who've been raidin' the bullion shipments from the Golden King mine."

"You're goin' too fast for me," murmured Blake, a deep frown ridging his forehead. "How did you—?"

"I'll tell you. Three weeks ago when those bullion raids first started an' we picked up the trail o' the outlaws, then lost it in the badlands, I got to thinkin' that this desolate region would be a good place for a hideout. The day you rode to the mine to check on things at that end, I took a pasear into the hills. After two hour of scoutin' I found this cabin. Just as I entered the clearing three men jumped me. One o' them was my own twin brother. They've kept

me a prisoner since that day. They've practically starved me to death while Ed was in town posin' as a Texas Ranger in my place."

"BUT why?" demanded Blake, still incredulous.

"It all goes back a long time," said the Ranger captain. "Ed an' me never did hit it off well. Ed always had a wild, bad streak in him. We were both in love with the same girl. After she consented to marry me, he vowed he'd make things tough for both of us. Far as I can see he succeeded.

"When I started a cattle ranch I had one round o' trouble after another—rustlin', burned winter hay, my line riders terrorized. Never was able to catch the jiggers responsible but I'd swear it was Ed. Then I was elected town marshal some years afterward, Ed came into town an' killed a man in cold blood. I had to arrest him. He was given a trial an' sentenced to hang, but he escaped the night before his execution. He left a note sayin' he'd get even with me if it was the last thing he did.

"That was four years ago. I joined the Rangers shortly after that affair. Then three weeks ago he returned to keep his promise. He hated me because it wasn't in him to be the kind of a man I've been. He hated my position, my reputation with the Rangers. And it suited his black purpose during these few weeks to pose as Captain Waverly."

Jim Blake's features were grim and bleak. "That means I was actually takin' orders from the man behind the bullion raids."

Waverly nodded. "That's right. My brother planned to scoop all he could outa these raids, then take the bullion to Mexico an' convert it into cash. As for me, he just let me live so I would be tortured by the knowledge that he was masquerading in my place while ramroddin' those attacks on the bullion stages.

"Of course, he planned to kill me before he cleared outa the country, though God knows I'm half dead from livin' on nothin' but bread an' water for three weeks." Waverly paused and glanced at Blake. "But tell me, Jim. How did you get here? I could swear I heard your voice in the cabin earlier this evening plannin' to help in the raid."

"You heard me, all right." Blake responded quickly. As briefly as he could, he explained his bold plan for capturing the renegades, then told of the actual raid, the wrecking of the stage and the ride back to the shack with the captain's twin brother. "My plan almost backfired," Blake concluded. "There I was revealin' my whole plan to the actual leader of the outlaws. But why did he tag along an' let me carry it out?"

"That was Ed's way, Jim," Waverly told him. "He liked the risk. He was toyin' with you, knowin' darn well he could have you killed whenever it pleased him to do so. He sent those three gun-slicks to the saloon to ask you to join the gang. They knew all the while your bein' fired from the Rangers was only a blind. When you told me just now about how they talked of a quick payoff, they meant in lead. They probably had it all planned to shoot you in the back during the bullion raid."

Blake scowled and a muscle along his jaw quivered in angry memory. "What I can't understand is why your brother was ridin' the stage tonight as shotgun guard an' how come he got shot."

Waverly shrugged. "Mebbe it was just a bluff. Ben Nevins by this time probably can't hire a shotgun guard for love or money. Ed went along,

figgerin' he'd be perfectly safe. Either he was shot accidentally, or his paid hirelings were figgerin' to double-cross him. And you were lucky at that, Jim. If Ed hadn't lost his gun in the raid he no doubt would have salivated you on the way to the hideout. As it happened, his idea o' goin' to the rear of the cabin gave him a chance to meet his men, get a gun an' prepare a bullet trap for you!"

"Yeah, an' it proved to be a boomerang for him," said Blake. The rich wine of success filled him with new strength, made him forget the pain of his wounds. "The bullion is lyin' down the canyon with the wrecked stage. We can have it freighted to town in the mornin'."

"The rest o' the dinero is buried beneath the floor o' this cabin," said Waverly. "That cleans up this case."

"It sure does, except I feel kinda undressed without my Texas Ranger badge."

"Jim, you don't need a badge." John Waverly was grinning now and there was a happy glint in his tired eyes. "Your gun an' your fists are all the badge you'll ever need. It's enough for me an' it'll be enough for the Texas Rangers!"

THE END

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A Complete Novelet

by LEE FLOREN

CHAPTER I

TROUBLED RANGE

RINGBONE SMITH knew that sooner or later the trouble would have to start. He was at his Lazy Z ranch, sixty miles south of Boxelder, when Connie Burnett brought the news.

He had been at the Lazy Z for a week. When Connie rode in, the old veterinary had a sorrel gelding hogtied in a corral, operating on the horse's ankle.

He looked at her curiously. She had red hair, a stubby nose. Usually, her blue eyes sparkled. He noticed, now, that her eyes were dull, lifeless. She had been crying.

"What you doin' out here?" he asked. "You're a long ways from home, young lady."

"Ed's in jail," she said. "In Boxelder."

"What happened?"

Ringbone Smith and Funeral O'Neill were in a fix: Ed Burnett was in jail, and if he stayed in, he'd stretch rope. But bushwhack guns were waiting for him if he left. It seemed that there was nothing the two grizzled partners could do—but they went at it just the same! A rip-snortin', gol-durn yarn if we ever saw one!

"Pete Gardner claims him an' his men caught Ed blottin' out a brand on one of Gardner's Quarter Circle S cows. Gardner swore out a warrant."

"When?"

"Yesterday mornin'. I started for you right off."

Ringbone nodded slowly. The story was an old one to him: he had met it many times, and he understood it thoroughly.

"Let's eat, an' hit the trail," he said. "We can make Boxelder by tomorrow afternoon. Ed'll keep till then. They set a date for the trial yet?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Hurryin' up the case, huh? Well, we'll see what we'll see, Connie."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, gathered his medicine-kit. He was a short man—five-foot-eight, heavy-set. He wore dirty Levis, run-over boots. Iron-gray hair.

He untied the sorrel. The animal got to his feet.

"Keep that ankle bandaged an' clean," he told his foreman. "Exercise him in four days—not much, though. Saddle a fresh horse for Connie. I'll ride my buckskin."

"Need any help?" the foreman asked.

"You can help me most by runnin' the place while I'm gone. Mighta knowed if I stayed outa Boxelder a week some damn fool thing like this'd happen."

They rode out of the Lazy Z an hour later, pointing their horses toward Boxelder, the county seat. You could look any direction and all you could see around you were the sun-browned Montana foothills.

Ringbone rode his top-horse, a hammer-headed buckskin. Connie rode a long-legged dun.

Her small face showed her worry. Ringbone's leather face showed nothing. They rode about five miles in silence before Ringbone asked, "Funeral O'Neill in town?"

"He's at the Hansford ranch. Grandma Hansford died yesterday morning. I saw him when I rode out to get you."

"What'd he say?"

"He said he'd drive across country and meet us at the N Bar Y tomorrow morning."

Ringbone frowned. He and his partner, Funeral O'Neill, the undertaker, sure had a problem facing them.

Pete Gardner, owner of the Big Quarter Circle S, wanted Ed Burnett out of his way. Ed had filed on a hundred and sixty acres of land at the head of Down creek. He had dammed that stream and used the water for irrigation.

Pete Gardner claimed that his cattle, because of Ed Burnett's dam, had suffered from lack of water.

THE matter had been aired in court. Ed Burnett proved that the normal flow of Down creek still ran over his spillways. He claimed he held back on the surplus waters that resulted from a rain or snow runoff in the spring.

The court had agreed with Ed.

The settlers had hailed the verdict as a victory. The cowmen, viewing with alarm the encroachments of the farmers, fired and held by the spell of Gardner's propaganda, grew more taciturn and tight-lipped.

Ed Burnett had ridden into Boxelder four years before. He had sided Ringbone Smith and Funeral O'Neill in a gunfight with four Canadian killers.

After the powdersmoke had cleared, Ringbone and Funeral had grubstaked Ed while he filed on his Down creek homestead. Ed had re-

paid the two old partners, and had married Connie.

Pete Gardner had wanted Connie, too. And, when Connie chose Ed, she had made Gardner the laughing-stock of the country because Gardner had openly boasted he would marry her.

That was why Pete Gardner had it in for Ed Burnett. Not that Gardner wanted Connie so bad—his pride had been hurt, and Gardner was an awful proud man. Ed Burnett would pay for making men laugh at him.

All these thoughts ran through Ringbone Smith as they rode toward Boxelder. Ringbone and Funeral had settled this Boxelder country, had fought and whipped the Sioux, had brought up the first Texas trail-herds and had started the cow-business in that section.

That night, they made the N Bar Y. Next morning, when they came into the kitchen, Funeral O'Neill was already eating his breakfast.

Funeral O'Neill was gaunt, bony, and six-foot-six. He wore a black suit, a shoestring necktie, and a black, flat-brimmed Stetson. His face was long, narrow. His eyes, dark, brooding, were set deeply under his heavy eyebrows.

"Howdy, Ringbone. Howdy, Gal!" His tone was deep, sepulchral.

"Howdy, Funeral."

"Hello, Mr. O'Neill."

They ate in silence. Finally, his last hotcake gone, Funeral O'Neill pushed back his chair. He turned his heavy eyes on Mrs. Hanley, the N Bar Y housewife.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hanley," he rumbled, and went outside.

Ringbone and Connie followed. Funeral hitched his black geldings to his Democrat buggy, snapped his whip and rolled toward Boxelder, the dust rising high behind him.

Connie saddled a fresh N Bar Y horse, but Ringbone still rode his buckskin. And, though they rode fast, they never caught up with the buggy.

They reached Boxelder that afternoon. The cow-town was filled with rigs. Saddle-horses lined the hitch-poles. Ringbone measured the main street with a careful glance.

Cowmen stood in groups on one side of that main street. Across from the cowmen, on the other side of the street, farmers and nesters moved with affected nonchalance, only the grimness of their weather-beaten faces displaying the hardness of their thoughts.

THEY rode to the livery-barn. Already, Funeral had unhitched and unharnessed his lather-coated team. They turned their horses over to the hostler.

"I'm going to see Ed," Connie said. She looked at them. "You'll both be over to the jail soon, won't you Ed'll be anxious to see you."

"Sure will," Ringbone told her.

The woman went toward the jail, a square-built brick building down the street. She walked down the side of the main street where the nesters were congregated.

Funeral spat, looked at Ringbone. "What's first?" he asked.

Ringbone frowned. "How about you doin' some thinkin' for a while?" he asked.

"I'll leave that to you," Funeral replied.

"No use bailin' Ed outa jail. He'll match guns with Gardner. An' Gardner'll kill 'im. Jail's a good place for Ed."

"What if the jury frees him?"

"We can't afford that. We gotta knock down Gardner's horns first."

"How we gonna dehorn this Gardner maverick?"

"Donno yet. . . Let's see Ed."

They went toward the jail. Ringbone saw four cowmen standing in front of the Long Diamond Bar. The two Blue brothers, owners of the Rafter L; Fred Hanson, taciturn boss of the Long X.

Pete Gardner was the fourth man. Gardner packed two low-tied guns. His face was long, thin—yet a hardness was stamped on it. A hardness that bespoke of violent passions.

Gardner looked at them coldly. Ringbone felt the cowman's gaze move over him. Those eyes held an arrogance that lifted Ringbone's blood slightly, made his heavy muscles tighten.

"Where do you men stan' on the nester question?" Gardner asked.

"That's puttin' it bluntly," Ringbone said.

Gardner's voice was low. "I caught this coyote, Ed Burnett, stealin' my stock. Changin' my Quarter Circle S into a Circle 8."

"That's your side of it," Ringbone said. "I'll see what Ed's got to say for himself."

"You doubtin' my word, Smith?"

Ringbone hid his strong dislike for the cowman beneath an emotionless face. Funeral had moved a few feet away, his hands on his two .45s.

The Blue brothers, too, had pulled to one side, but their hands were not on gungrips. Fred Hanson had done likewise.

Ringbone caught the odor of rotgut whiskey on Pete Gardner's breath.

"You been drinkin' too much, Pete," he said, and turned away.

Funeral O'Neill followed.

CHAPTER II

JURY TRIAL

A RAWBONED farmer said, "Glad you're sidin' us, Ringbone. You, too, Funeral."

"We ain't sidin' nobody," Ringbone said decisively. "We're here to see justice's done—nothin' more."

The nester's jaw fell. "Them damn cowmen been ridin' us hoemen long enough. Hell, they's plenty uh room here for both of us. Pete Gardner's been waitin' for a chance to jump on Ed. More so since we elected Ed president of the Farmers' Union."

"Go easy on that talk," Ringbone advised.

Ringbone and Funeral entered the jail. Sheriff Monty Dunlap, bowlegged, gray-haired, sat behind his desk, his brow patently worried. Ringbone and Funeral had known the oldster for years.

"You look like your Missus threatened to come back an' live with you," Ringbone said drily.

Dunlap groaned. "Why in the hell would any man want this job?" he asked wearily.

"You said the same thing fifteen years ago," Ringbone reminded. "You lettin' a little thing like this get you down?"

"She ain't small," the lawman said. "She's a big order. We'll do good to keep guns from poppin'. Mike already had to slap a drunk farmer in jail. The sod-buster claimed he was goin' to run Pete Gardner plumb into the badlands."

"Sit tight," Ringbone said easily. "What's that you're readin'?"

"Jury list for tomorrow's trial."

"Morton goin' be judge?"

"Yeah. Only goin' use a six-man jury, though."

"Why not twelve men?"

"Morton says six'll be enough."

"I see," Ringbone said slowly.

A thought was growing back in Ringbone's mind. The sight of the jury-list on Dunlap's desk had brought a sudden plan to life.

Ed Burnett was innocent. The brand-blotting charge was a frame-up. Ed would never steal a cow—he was too honest.

If the jury turned Ed loose he'd walk smack into a gunfight with Pete Gardner. And Ringbone didn't want that. Connie was a pretty girl . . .too damned pretty to become a widow.

What if Ed Burnett were convicted and sent to Deer Lodge penitentiary? That would break Connie's heart—ruin Ed's life.

Ringbone had wondered how he would handle the case, now he knew. If the jury hung, nothing could be decided; no verdict would be rendered and Ed would be bound over for another trial.

Dunlap stayed in his office. Ringbone and Funeral went down the cell-aisle of the jail, which was attached to Dunlap's office. Connie was talking to Ed Burnett, a wide-shouldered young man with a square, honest face.

"What the hell you doin' in here?" Ringbone asked.

"That's what I'm wonderin'," Ed Burnett said sourly.

Ringbone grinned. "Them bars kinda set off his beauty, huh, Funeral?"

Funeral spat. "Nothin' could help Ed's looks."

"What happened?" Ringbone asked.

"I was ridin' Lone Pine crick lookin' for some horses. I sees a smoke ahead an' investigates. They's a corral in the brush with eight cows inside. An' they're packin' my bran', the Circle 8."

"Yeah."

"They ain't my cows—I know that. There's a brandin' fire there, with an iron in it. A stamp iron bearin' my Circle 8. I'm standin' there aholdin' this iron when Pete Gardner an' some of his riders come outa the brush. They caught me flat-footed."

"Purty slick," Ringbone allowed.

Burnett's lips tightened. "I rode into their trap."

"An' into jail," the veterinary finished.

"I tried to raise bail," Burnett said. "But the damn judge set my bond so high the farmers couldn't raise that much."

"No use raisin' bond now. Wait till your trial tomorrow."

"Yeah. . .wait! A cattleman judge, an' no doubt a cowman jury. An' me a hoeman! Hell, I'll have as much chance of comin' free as a horse of flyin' to heaven!"

"One hoss flew to heaven," Ringbone said philosophically. "A Greek horse. What was that critter's name, Funeral?"

"Pegasus."

"Talk sense," Burnett said.

CONNIE sobbed. "It's all my fault," she said brokenly. "He came to our place when Ed was gone. I told him to stay away. He offered me everything—fine clothes, an' all that. I had to tell Ed. Ed swore he'd kill him. Then—this happened."

"Hush, honey."

"I'll kill him when I get out," Ed Burnett promised.

Ringbone said, severely, "Forget that talk Ed!"

Ed Burnett said, "Connie, please don't cry!"

Ringbone pulled Funeral into a far corner out of hearing distance. "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?" he asked.

Funeral studied him. "That jury-list?" he asked.

Ringbone nodded. "We gotta get those names."

"What good'll that do?"

"Ever hear of a hung jury?"

Funeral nodded. "But the sheriff's settin' over it like an ol' hen."

"Leave that to me," Ringbone said. "Sheriff!"

Sheriff Dunlap came down the cell-aisle. "What's up?"

"When'd you feed Ed last?" Ringbone asked. "He looks mighty ga'nt."

"He just et," Dunlap said. He looked inquiringly at Ed Burnett who, in turn, looked questioningly at Ringbone. "You hollerin' about bein' hungry, Ed?"

"Hell, no!"

Dunlap turned on Ringbone. "I can run this jail without your help."

"Sorry," Ringbone said.

Funeral O'Neil, unnoticed by the Connie or Ed or Dunlap, had slipped into the sheriff's office and right now, if Ringbone was any prophet, Funeral was reading the names of the jurors.

"Don't make any more mistakes," Dunlap said.

Dunlap stared back toward his office, met Funeral O'Neill in the doorway, eyed the undertaker suspiciously.

"Where you bin?"

"Gettin' a drink of water in your office," Funeral said. "Any law ag'in that?"

Dunlap chewed and studied Funeral. Funeral chewed and studied Dunlap.

Finally, Dunlap said, "No, I reckon not," and entered his office.

Ed Burnett stared at the partners. "What you two cookin' up?"

"We'll see you at the trial," Ringbone said. Outside, he asked Funeral, "Get the names?"

Funeral spat. "Accordin' to that list, the county-attorney selected 'em yesterday. They already been notified of their selection."

"Irregular procedure, ain"t it?"

"This is an important case. It needs an honest jury. So the county-attorney didn't draw from a regular panel. He handpicked his men."

"Who are they?"

Funeral told him. The attorney, seeking impartial men, had not selected a farmer or cowman; he had chosen six townsmen.

"Ham Nelson's one," Ringbone said. "What say we visit him first?"

"Okay," Funeral grunted.

Hamilton Nelson, short, pot-bellied, owner of the General Store, said, "Somethin', gentlemen?"

"We wanta talk with you," Ringbone said. They went to the rear-office, found chairs, lit cigars, and Ringbone continued: "So you're a juror on the Burnett trial tomorrow, huh?"

Nelson studied him. "How'd you know? County-attorney say'd nobody else would know but me an' him."

Ringbone overlooked that question. "Where'd you stan'?" he asked. "Fer Ed or ag'in Ed?"

"I don't know....yet. I haven't heard the trial."

Ringbone said, frowning, "Gardner'll bring out a lot of perjured evidence. He aims to frame Ed. We don't want that to happen, Nelson."

Nelson's jaw tightened. "You threatenin' me?"

"No, Hamilton. But Ed's innocent.

You got a nice store here. Needs a lotta trade to keep it runin' an' showin' a profit. By the way, who's your biggest customer?"

"You are," Nelson said. "An' I'm mighty grateful I got the contract supplyin' grub to your Lazy Z, your Bar Nine, your—" He halted suddenly, his colorless eyes showing a swift understanding. "I see, Ringbone. I understand'...."

RINGBONE asked, "Ed'll go free?"

Nelson smiled tightly. "I have but one vote, of course, an there'll be five others. But my vote shall call for the defendant's acquittal. You may rest assured on that point. Good day, gentlemen."

"So long, Ham."

Outside, Funeral said solemnly, "I don't hol' a club over nobody. By the time I get holda 'em, everybody else has trimmed 'em proper. I jus' get the leavin's. Where now?"

"Fred Survat's."

Survat, burly, lumbering, leaned against a pile of six-by-six, there in his lumberyard. Yes, Ringbone was his best customer. Hell, last year Ringbone'd built a barn so big that it required thousands and thousands of feet of lumber—biggest barn he had ever seen. And the lumber all came from his yard....

"Ed Burnett," he declared, "is innocent, gentlemen. An' nothin' on God's green earth can make me change my mind!"

Ringbone said, meaningly, "Sometime's it pays to be bull-headed, Fred."

Survat grinned broadly. "I'm as bull-headed as a Shorthorn durin' fly time," he said emphatically.

Ringbone and Funeral left.

"That oughta be enough," Funeral said. "Them two could tie that jury into hondos an' hang it tighter then a water-soaked lass-rope knot."

"One more."

Phil Buchan, the hardware owner, was mad. He was under a new mower, trying to make a pitman-rod fit. He wiped grease from his hands and listened, his jaw hardening.

"No," he said.

Ringbone frowned. Who had bought fifteen mowers and seven hayrakes from him the month before? And those three haystackers and those bull-rakes? And ten sets of heavy work harness?

Buchan frowned, too. He crawled back under the mower. He cursed at the pitman-rod. He finally got the rod into place. He grinned, then. He looked at Funeral O'Neill's gaunt, predatory face, and his grin died.

"You got me," he admitted. "Got me when I'm alive. An' that black buzzard there'll get me when I kick the bucket."

"I'll be waitin'," Funeral said grimly. "How about Ed?"

"Ed's innocent. I'll see that he don't get railroaded. Now get t'hell outa here! I got work to do!"

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE TALKS

THAT evening, Ringbone Smith and Funeral O'Neill sat on the bench in front of Ringbone's office. The veterinary was whittling on a diamond-willow cane he was making for Grandpa Wiggins.

A cool breeze came down from the Little Belt mountains, standing snow-tipped and tall against the northern twilight.

This was the time of day most pleasing to these oldsters. But they

thought not of peace as they looked over Boxelder town.

Ringbone wore a heavy scowl. Funeral chewed hard on his fine-cut.

Trouble was ahead.

The hoemen, instead of returning to their farms, had stayed in town. Now they stood in tight groups and talked, that tenseness permeating them. They stayed on their side of the street, though.

The cowmen had not left, either.

Saloons were busy. Men moved in and out of the drinking emporiums. The yellow lamplight laid dancing rectangles of light upon the main-street.

Ringbone said, "Good night for the saloon-keepers," and his voice was thoughtful, showing something else, too—a growing worry.

And he had reason to worry. Whiskey made fools of men, drove them into a fine, fighting anger, magnified their troubles and turned them into stupendous, overwhelming objects—drove them to guns, to killings.

Sheriff Monty Dunlap stopped before them. Heavy, solid, he bulked large, there in the gathering night.

"You boys visited a lot this afternoon," he said.

Ringbone shot him a sudden glance. "What'd you mean?"

"You visited Nelson's store. Then the lumber yard, the hardware. Business?"

Ringbone glanced at Funeral. Funeral spat. Ringbone said, "A man's got a right to go where he wants. Constitution grants him that. What's on your mind, Sher'f?"

Dunlap measured them with a careful look. "Nothin' much," he said. He went down the street.

Ringbone looked at Funeral. "He don't know whether or not you seen that jury-list. He figgers you did, but he ain't sure. So he ain't tippin' his han'. His britches is caught on our bob-wire."

"Nelson or Buchan or Survat won't tell him nothin'," Funeral said. "They know who butters their bread."

"Trouble with Dunlap," Ringbone said philosophically, "is that the coot's too dang honest, Funeral. He'd jail himself if he figgered he had it comin'. He's so honest he's suspicious of everybody who crosses him."

Ringbone whittled. Funeral chewed. Downstreet, a drunken cowhand whooped happily and a saddle-horse stomped at a hitchrack.

Mike Sterling, the deputy-sheriff, stopped before them, his square face showing his worry.

"Swaller your chaw?" Ringbone asked.

"Gardner's drunk in the Star," the deputy said. "An' he's plenty mean. He's circulatin' talk about makin' a jail delivery. An' some of the cowmen're takin' up the same talk. I don't like it, men."

"What do the hoemen say?"

"They talk the same. Only they don't want Ed out to hang him—they just crave to bust him loose an' give him a fast hawss."

"The whiskey's talkin'," Ringbone said. "What'd you an' Dunlap aim to do?"

THE deputy frowned. "I dunno," he said. He grumbled something more, and then left.

Ringbone looked at Funeral. "If it's the same to you," he said, "I'll manhandle Gardner an' the cowmen...."

Funeral said, "I sorta cottoned to that chore. But seein' you talked first, you kin have it. I'll show sense to these sod-busters." He sighed, spat. "Life is full of trouble, Ring-

bone. Here I was, enjoyin' the evenin'—"

Ringbone snorted. "You're prancin' like an ol' fire-hawss. Unload your woes on Sim Mondack. He's leader of the plow-men, now that Ed's jugged. Halter-break that loud-talkin' son an' the others'll foller you plumb gentle-like."

"Holler if you need me," Funeral said.

"I won't need you."

Funeral O'Neill crossed the street. He made a gaunt, funereal figure in the dim light—a figure that, nevertheless, held a sterness, a hardness, about it, despite its huge height and slender build.

Ringbone watched Funeral enter the Silver Dollar. Then he laid down the diamond-willow. He snapped shut his jack-knife. He spat, hitched up his guns, and went toward the Star Bar, a block down-street.

The Star was Boxelder's biggest saloon. A whiskery, long-nosed oldster named Pegleg Jack was the proprietor. Somewhere, someplace, sometime, Pegleg had lost his right leg at the knee—now he strapped on a crude wooden leg and hobbled around using a long-barrelled twelve-gauge shotgun as a crutch....and a peace preserver.

Only cattlemen patronized the Star. Not that Pegleg cared a whit who his patrons were—he wanted their dinero, not their company.

Kerosene lamps were very bright inside. Ringbone stood momentarily in the doorway and let his eyes become accustomed to the glare.

Card tables were busy. Cowmen and their riders were at the bar. Ringbone figured there were about forty riders in the place.

Gardner was at the bar with his back toward Ringbone. On his right stood his foreman, Carson, a heavy-set rider. Ringbone took a position at Gardner's left.

"A small beer," he ordered.

Gardner's eyes, Ringbone noticed, were bloodshot. "Never knew you drank," the cowman said.

Ringbone said, "A beer once in a while. 'Specially when I got a disdainful job to do...."

Gardner's brows rose. "Such as which?"

"Was comin' to that," Ringbone said slowly. "Me an' Funeral O'Neill started this Boxelder town, Gardner. There was jus' a prairie when we come here—hell, we even got a post-office now."

"Which leads to what?"

Ringbone thoughtfully studied his beer. "This," he said. "Even in them days, me an' Funeral never allowed a lynchin', even though Funeral did need the business!" He chuckled.

But Gardner held no mirth. The barb in Ringbone's seemingly idle prattle pierced the whiskey-dulled fogginess of his brain, bringing an illuminating moment of clarity.

He said, clearly, "At midnight us cowmen's springin' Ed Burnett outa jail an' elevatin' him high up on a Milk River cottonwood!"

"Maybe...."

GARDNER'S eyes turned to dark marbles set hard in the flatness of his expressionless face. Carson cursed and started around Gardner but Gardner pushed back his foreman.

"You're takin' a big bite, Ringbone."

"I kin swaller it," Ringbone said.

"These nesters've dealt us cowmen a heap of misery."

Ringbone turned to one of the assembled cowmen. "Cooper," he said,

"Did any hoeman ever cut one of your fences?"

"No."

"Ever miss any stock?"

"A few head. But I lost that many afore the settlers came. Figgered the Injuns over on the reservation always managed to ear off a couple. Why?"

"Got plenty of water?"

"Plenty. Why?"

Ringbone did not answer. He turned to Bates, a Butte Hill cowman. He asked him the same question, and received the same answers.

The hoemen had not bothered Bates.

Bond, of the Sunken Creek ranch, met the same questions—he, too, had experienced no losses at the hands of the farmers.

Ringbone said, "Well?" and looked at Gardner.

"Well—what?" Gardner demanded. His voice was low, throaty, and the muscles stood out like ropes on his thick neck.

Only Gardner heard what Ringbone said. "Connie Burnett don't cotton to your tongue, Gardner."

"If you wasn't an ol' man—"

Ringbone interrupted. "I'm not too old!" He slapped Gardner, hard, across the jaw. The blow sounded loudly.

Gardner came in fast. Angered, he forgot his .45; his fists worked diligently.

Ringbone fought coldly. A strange, latent feeling, something he had not experienced for many years, rose within him, firing his muscles with a powerful strength. All the fighting-knowledge that he had learned in bar-room brawls came to him, helped him.

But Gardner was young, tough, hard-hitting. He bulled Ringbone across the saloon, his fists working.

A card-table crashed. A chair broke. Men fell back hurriedly behind the combatants. A drunk cheered.

Pegleg Jack laid his shotgun across the bar. Carson, the Gardner foreman, reached for his gun.

"Be careful," Pegleg said.

Carson looked at the shotgun, then at Pegleg. "You got me wrong."

"Sorry."

Carson made no move toward his weapon.

Gardner's fists hammered Ringbone's ribs. Pain ran through the oldster. He fought hard, his breathing heavy. He got his second wind.

There was no denying him after that. Strategy became the deciding issue. A right sent Gardner back. Gardner fought hard. But his steam was gone.

A hot anger burned inside Ringbone, driving him on. Gardner went down, and stayed down.

Gardner spat blood. His hand started toward his holstered .45. A cold voice stopped him.

"I'm no young sage hen myself," Pegleg Jack said. "So I sorta admire an ol' gent that can whittle down a young buck to his size. This scattergun'll tear hell outa a man at this range, Gardner."

GARDNER looked at the shotgun, and drew back his hand.

"Much obliged, Pegleg," Ringbone said.

"No charge."

Ringbone said, "Get up, Gardner."

Gardner got a-foot. Ringbone took Gardner's guns from holsters, tossed them to Pegleg.

"Keep 'em for' im," Ringbone looked at Carson. "Kinda keep your eye on this youngster, too," he added.

"Sure will."

Ringbone drew one of his own

guns, stuck it in Gardner's ribs. "Get movin'." He marched Gardner outside. The cowmen drew back before them. Not a word was raised in objection.

Outside, the stars showed coldly and a full moon rode the foothills to send a yellow light over the rangelands.

Ringbone heard a sudden commotion in the Silver Dollar Saloon, across the street. He grinned. The commotion ceased and Funeral O'Neill came outside, pushing the battered Mondack ahead of him.

Funeral breathed heavily. His shoe-string necktie was askew. His long face held a heavy scowl.

Mondack had a black eye. One lip was broken. Blood trickled down his bewhiskered chin.

"This feller was kinda bull-headed," Funeral said. "I had to persuade him some. Where to now?"

"Jail-house."

Sheriff Dunlap stared at them. "What happened?"

"Got an empty cell?"

"Yeah. You got a warrant for this arrest?"

"Don't need none," Ringbone said. "A citizen has the right to make an arrest. We're usin' that privilege. Be sure you don't let 'em out till daylight."

Ringbone took the cell keys from Dunlap's desk. Funeral helped him lock the two men in a cell next to that of Ed Burnett.

"What's up?" Ed asked.

"Skunk round-up," Ringbone said.

Gardner started cursing. Mondack wiped blood from his chin. Ringbone grinned and went back to Dunlap's office, Funeral trailing him.

"What the hell happened?" Dunlap asked.

"They'll tell you all about it," Ringbone said. He and Funeral left. Outside, Funeral stretched, said: "I'm sleepy."

Ringbone ran a cursory glance over Boxelder. The horses at the hitchracks were thinning out, he noticed, and fewer men walked the streets. Even as he stood there, the Circle D cowboys mounted, and rode out of town.

"She'll be peaceful now," Ringbone said.

Funeral said, "I'm goin' to bed. See you come mornin'."

Ringbone watched his partner cross the street and enter his undertaking-parlor. Funeral had a cot in the rear of the building. Ringbone thought of how Funeral had whipped Mondack, and he smiled.

"Damned ol' fightin' coot!" he said admiringly.

Ringbone went to his own office .....and to bed.

CHAPTER IV

COURT DAY

HIS SLEEP was broken. Men traveled the alley behind his office as they went to the town hotel.

Usually, the noise they made did not disturb him, but tonight, he felt restless and couldn't sleep.

His knuckles were bruised. His ribs ached.

He himself had small moment for physical violence. He knew full well the seed of it bore only death and tragedy. But he had seen no other solution to the problem that he and Funeral O'Neil had faced that evening.

Suddenly, he heard bootheels enter the alley. They made a dragging, stumbling sound, much as if the man walking there were drunk. He heard

the man stumble. He heard a low, gutteral curse.

He was instantly awake. The voice was that of Carson, the Gardner foreman.

Then the bootheels stopped suddenly. He listened, but he did not hear them again. The man had not turned back—he had not gone ahead.

Ringbone waited for about five minutes.

He heard nothing more. A strange premonition prompting him, he pulled on his pants, buckled on his .45s. He did not pull on his boots—he donned a pair of house-slippers. Moving soundlessly, he went out the front door.

The moon was half-hidden behind the hills. Dark shadows hung close to the dusty earth. Only one horse stood now at the hitchracks. Most of the saloons were dark.

He looked at the jail. He saw a kerosene lamp burning. Dunlap and Sterling were taking no chances.

He moved down the street fifty yards, went between two buildings until he reached the alley. Hanging to the shadows, he worked toward the rear of his office, making no noise. He settled in the shadow cast by his wood-shed.

Carson was about thirty feet away, standing beside a building. He did not see Ringbone. Ringbone watched him carefully.

Carson was drinking. He lowered his bottle, smacked his lips. He dropped the bottle. It did not break. Carson picked it up. His movements were slow, uncertain, fumbling.

Ringbone smiled. Carson was drunk. He didn't know what Carson aimed to do in the alley. Maybe Carson did not even know that. But Ringbone knew one thing: he did not want Carson around.

Carson was a cocky gent. Big, blustering, he thought he owned the world. Ringbone aimed to give the swaggering range-boss a lesson in manners.

Ringbone moved ahead, stopped between two buildings. Carson started forward toward Ringbone. The range-boss walked close in to the building behind which Ringbone was hidden.

Ringbone raised his gun. Facets of moonlight reflected from the polished barrel. Carson was an arm-length away. He did not see Ringbone. Suddenly, Carson's knees buckled; he went down, cold.

The moonlight did not reflect from Ringbone's gun now, because the gun-barrel was matted with Carson's hair.

RINGBONE grabbed Carson by the collar, dragged him down the alley, rolled him inside a building, then he wiped his gun-barrel clean on Carson's pants. He went back to bed, and slept.

Later, he heard men moving in the alley, and there came a knocking at his rear door.

"Who's there?"

"George Price. Hey, Carson's out here. Somebody's bent a gun-barrel over him an' knocked him cold. What'll I do with him?"

"Do what you like," Ringbone growled.

Price said, "Wonder who socked him? Hell, they sure done a good job. He'll have a hangover, too, when he sobers up an' that, along with that pistol-whuppin', sure ain't goin' improve his disposition."

"Go to bed!" Ringbone said.

Six o'clock found Ringbone and Funeral sitting on the bench in front of Ringbone's office, their appetites properly weighted down by a stack of Chung Lin's wheat-cakes. Ring-

bone worked on the diamond-willow cane. Funeral chewed tobacco.

"Gonna be a busy day," Ringbone said.

Funeral nodded.

Sheriff Dunlap came up to them. Ringbone noticed that the lawman's eyes were bloodshot. "You look sleepy," he said.

"Didn't get a wink all night. Hell, who can sleep on a powder-keg. How about Gardner an' Mondack?"

"Turn 'em loose."

Dunlap studied his knuckles. "Jailin' 'em was a good idea," he said. "Sure killed that jail-delivery talk." He went back up-street.

Carson came out of the doctor's office. His head was so heavily bandaged that it looked like he wore a turban.

Ringbone asked, "What happened to you?"

"What the hell's it to you!"

Ringbone chuckled. He turned to Funeral. "He musta run into somethin' with his head," he said.

"Looks that-a-way."

Sim Mondack and Pete Gardner left the jail. Mondack grinned sheepishly. Gardner's face was drawn tight by his anger.

Mondack looked at Funeral. "I had it comin," he said. "That was the whiskey talkin', not me." He chuckled. "Well, got a free bed, anyway. That bunk woulda cost me a buck an' a half, down the State House."

Mondack went down-street.

Ringbone looked at Gardner. "Well?" he asked.

Gardner's voice was low. But even at that, he seemed to fling his words across the space separating them. The harshness of the cowman's tone brought a sudden anger to Ringbone. But the old veterinary curbed the emotion, knowing full well that its release would do no material good.

"You'll pay for this, Smith."

Ringbone said, "I'd hate to have to kill you, Gardner. This was a peaceful range till you moved in. Now it's talkin' gun-war. You make a move to bother Ed Burnett or Connie an' me an' Funeral's steppin' in."

"This range is too small for me an' Ed Burnett," Gardner said. "I'll kill Ed if that jury turns him loose." He turned, entered the Mission Saloon.

Funeral looked at his knuckles. "Them that look long enough for trouble," he opined, "sooner er later manage to meet up with a bullet..."

They sat there all forenoon. Box-elder was filling with buggies, buckboards, spring-wagons. Farmers brought their families. Cowmen trekked into saloons.

THE trial was to start at one o'clock. Two hours before that time, people started toward the court house, there at the end of the main-street.

Mike Sterling, the deputy-sheriff, was collecting guns at the doorway. Nobody could enter the court-room unless he were first disarmed.

"Good idea," Ringbone said.

Ringbone and Funeral entered the court-room at twelve-thirty. The long room was already crowded, but they managed to find seats on a rear bench.

Still people entered. Ranchers; riders; farmers; townsmen. Farm women dressed in starched gingham. Now a rancher's wife and daughter wearing satin, leg-of-mutton sleeves; black gloves.

His hands clasped around his front, Ringbone dozed. Lanky, cadav-

erous-looking, Funeral O'Neill sat and chewed tobacco.

"Here comes the Judge," Funeral said.

The audience rose. Judge Morton was a sour-looking long strip of humanity, ornery, crabby. He was a cowman.

Sheriff Dunlap and Ed Burnett and a sallow-faced attorney entered behind Judge Morton. The jury filed into its box. The judge rapped for order.

Ringbone kept on dozing. Funeral chewed methodically, his long face dead-pan, his eyes showing nothing.

Pete Gardner took the stand first. He looked sort of funny, Ringbone thought. Sitting up there with a black eye and his lips swollen. But Gardner sure could talk.

Ringbone must have slept. For the next he knew was Funeral poking him in the ribs. "Quit that damn snorin'," the undertaker said.

Ringbone looked at the clock over Judge Morton's chair. Four o'clock.

Judge Morton was instructing the jury, his long jaw working fast. Ed Burnett, His Honor said, was guilty. His Honor insisted that the jury bring in a verdict of guilty....

Ringbone heard a woman sob in front. He could not see who was crying, but he figured it was Connie. He looked at Survat and Buchan and Nelson.

But the jury-men did not meet his gaze; they were looking at Judge Morton.

The jury filed into a side room. Judge Morton declared a recess until a verdict had been reached. He warned against the audience leaving the court-room. He expected a quick verdict, he said.

Cowboys rolled Durham cigarets; farmers lit pipes; women chatted.

Ringbone touched the sulphur to a long cheroot. His cigar at a perky angle, he leaned back and contemplated upon the quickest and most permanent way to rid Boxelder of its most undesirable citizen....Pete Gardner.

And he found but one answer. Gunpowder—hot-lead.

Gardner had sworn to kill Ed Burnett. Ed, in turn, had promised to kill Gardner. Somebody'd have to kill Gardner before Ed tried because Ed was no gunman....and Gardner was. And Ed had Connie to think about.

But Ed would be safe in jail. And the hung-jury would keep him in jail, too.

Ringbone and Funeral were indebted to Ed. Ed had risked his life when he had helped them down those Canadian killers, four years before.

Also, Ringbone and Funeral had founded Boxelder, nursed it—brought law, order. And now Pete Gardner...

One hour passed. Two. Judge Morton frowned. Pete Gardner scowled. Ed Burnett was solemn, glum. Ringbone grinned.

Then Ringbone frowned, too, as the bailiff came from the jury-room. "The Jury has reached a verdict, Your Honor."

Judge Morton called for order. Ringbone's cheroot lost its cocky angle. The jury had not hung—it had reached a decision....Something was haywire.

Had his jurors weakened and gone back on their promises? Had they convicted Ed Burnett?

"Have you reached a verdict, Gentlemen?" Judge Morton asked.

Buchan, the hardware man, acted as foreman. "We find the defendant....not guilty!"

CHAPTER V

GUN GOSPEL

A MOMENT'S silence. Then a slow rumble moved angrily through the assembled cowmen. A woman laughed—high-pitched, hysterical.

Ringbone looked at Funeral. The undertaker's face showed no emotion. Ringbone knew, though, that Funeral was worried.

Buchan and Survat and Nelson had done too good a job—they had persuaded the other three jurors to free Ed Burnett. Ringbone silently cursed himself for not letting the jurors know he had not wanted to free Ed—that he had just wanted the procedure tied up for an indefinite period.

Ed was free now. Gardner would kill him.

Ringbone elbowed his way to Sheriff Dunlap. Judge Morton was upbraiding the jury. "....miscarriage of justice....flagrant disregard for legal procedure...." Other words too—hot words.

"You got a han' in this!" Dunlap said. "Funeral saw that jury-list yesterday. You two bought off the jury!"

"Forget that talk, Dunlap."

"Forget it, hell! They'll kill Ed!"

"Keep Ed in jail."

"On what charge? They just freed him!"

Ringbone turned to the county-attorney. "What do you say?"

"We can jail him," the lawyer said. "Vagrancy charge, or somethin'. Hol' him till things quiet down."

"Do that."

"But the nesters—?" Dunlap said. "They'll get madder'n hell when we jail Ed. They'll tie into the cowmen."

"Can they fight without guns?" Ringbone asked.

Dunlap studied him. "What'd you mean?"

"Your deputy, Sterling, has got the gun of every man here," Ringbone said.

Dunlap's face lighted. "We hang onto the guns, huh? Jail Ed. Then set tight till things settle down, huh?"

"You think fast," Ringbone said.

Ringbone started back to Funeral. Connie Burnett came up. "They'll kill Ed," she said.

Ringbone told her the plan. "We'll get somethin' on Gardner," he assured her. "Then we'll jug him. We'll let Ed out then. Keep a tight lip, girl."

The crowd stared as Dunlap and Ed pushed down the aisle toward the door. Ed was still mancled to Dunlap. Dunlap halted at the door. He held up his hands and asked for silence.

"Ed's goin' back to jail," the lawman said.

"How come, Sher'ff? A jury just freed him!"

"For safekeepin'."

A cowman laughed. A farmer cursed. Dunlap's voice held a sudden stern authority, then, and the silence came again to the crowd.

"I've got your guns. I'm keepin' 'em. You can call for 'em at my office—tomorrow afternoon. First man caught pickin' a fist-fight or packin' a gun goes to jail dang pronto."

Ringbone and Funeral followed Ed and the lawman outside. Sterling looked thoughtfully at the pile of guns and gun-belts.

"I'll need help totin' these," he said.

RINGBONE and Funeral helped him carry the guns into the sheriff's office where they piled them in a corner.

Ed Burnett said nothing. Sheriff Dunlap put him in a cell.

Ringbone and Funeral left. A group of nesters were talking on the corner, and the pair went that way.

"Why not leave town?" Ringbone asked. "One thing'll lead to another. Then there'll be trouble."

Homesteaders exchanged glances. "All right," one finally said.

They climbed in buggies and mounted saddle-horses and left town. Pete Gardner came down the street toward Ringbone and Funeral. Carson, his foreman, and Winn Fargo, another Quarter Circle S rider, accompanied Gardner.

Gardner halted. He hooked his thumbs in his chap-belt. "Chasin' your children outa town?" he asked sarcastically.

Ringbone said, "You'll leave too—if you got any sense. An' you'll take your gunhan's with you."

Fargo, a stocky, red-haired gent, said, "Nobody's orderin' me aroun'."

Ringbone's face showed his anger. Funeral said, "I'm tired uh standin' up. Let's sit down, Ringbone. Nothin' here worth talkin' to...."

They crossed the street and sat on the bench in front of Ringbone's office.

Ringbone whittled on the willow cane. Funeral frowned, chewed tobacco, spat.

The sun set. Dusk covered the town. Neither man thought of supper.

"We gotta get rid of Gardner," Ringbone finally said.

"How?"

Ringbone closed his jack-knife. "Gettin' too dark to whittle," he said. He looked down the street. Most of the hoemen had left. Only the horses of a few cowmen remained at the hitchracks.

Ringbone saw Gardner's bronc. The cowman packed a rifle in his saddle-boot. His two cohorts, Fargo and Carson, also packed rifles on their saddles.

"What would happen if we turned Ed loose?" Ringbone asked.

"They'd kill him dead."

"How?"

"Shoot 'im!"

"Open gunfight? Right here in town?"

Funeral rubbed his long jaw. "Gardner's too wise for that. He's threatened to kill Ed. Me an' you heard him say that. That wouldn't go good for Gardner from a witness-stand. Gardner's reputation is plenty black as it is. He ain't any too purty. He knows that."

"I figger that-a-way, too. Imagine Ed bein' turned loose tonight. How would Gardner kill 'im?"

"Gardner ain't got no scruples. He'd ambush Ed, sure as hell. Then nobody could prove he killed Ed. Nobody saw him."

Ringbone frowned. "We agree there," he said. "Ed gets turned loose. He hits for home. He rides the Two Dot road. You know that road well. Where's the best place to pull off an ambushin'?"

"You're talkin' in circles," Funeral said.

"Answer my question."

Funeral chewed laboriously for a long moment. "Mind that clump of buckbrush on Sunken crick? Right where the road runs into the crick bottom? That's where I'd be ahidin'. Smack in that buckbrush."

"That's where I'd be a-settin', too."

"What's this all about?"

"You figger it out."

FUNERAL chewed, his long face serious. Suddenly, he stopped chewing. "I get it. We turn Ed loose. Gardner rides out to ambush Ed. But we jump Gardner afore he can kill Ed. But hell—what if Gardner don't ambush Ed? What if he kills Ed in town? Then Connie—"

Ringbone interrupted. "Ed ain't gettin' outa jail."

Funeral looked at him suddenly. "I get it. Ed don't get loose. But we pass word aroun' he's gettin' loose. Gardner rides out an' gets all set. An we don't free Ed. An' we settle Gardner's hash."

"You're gettin' smart."

Funeral scowled. "How'll we git word to Gardner?"

"I got that angle fixed. You an' the Widder Smart are right good friends—"

Funeral interrupted. "What's the widder got to do with this?"

"Carson's rustlin' the Widder, too," Ringbone said. "Seen 'em together coupla times. Fargo's sorta cottonin' to her, too. So's Gardner."

Funeral spat. "That woman's got too many men friends," he said. "Sometime's I figger I'll jus' drop outa the race. Go on, Ringbone."

"Her tongue works as fast as a windmill fan in a cyclone," Ringbone said. "She can't keep a thing to herself. Now what-say you head down to her boardin' house? Eat supper. Get confidential with 'er. Make 'er promise to keep a secret you tell her. Then, tell her they're turnin' Ed out at midnight. Nobody in town knows about it—on the sly, see. I got a hunch Gardner'll hear about it right pronto."

Funeral spat. "You're not so dumb." He rose, hitched up his pants. "See you in an hour, Ringbone."

Two hours later, Funeral sat down beside Ringbone. "Gardner an' his men stay at the Widder's tonight," he said.

Ringbone nodded.

Half an hour later, Gardner and his two riders came from the Bootstrap Saloon. They mounted and rode toward the Widder's.

"They keep their broncs in her barn," Funeral said.

Ringbone and Funeral, unseen by Gardner and his two gun-riders, went to the town livery-barn. The hostler had turned in for the night but the barn was open.

Ringbone saddled his hammer-headed buckskin. Funeral cinched a kak on a rawboned sorrel. Nobody saw them leave Boxelder.

They rode fast for five miles. They hid their horses in a gully. Then they walked about half a mile until they came to Sunken creek.

The buckbrush was thick, thorny. They settled on their haunches, hidden in the heavy under-growth, and waited for about thirty minutes before they heard the rap-rap of fastly-approaching horsehoofs.

"Three horses," Ringbone said.

Funeral nodded.

They drew their six-shooters, checked their guns.

"'Luck, Ringbone."

"Same to you, Funeral."

Ringbone drew back flatly against the dark trunk of a cottonwood tree. Funeral hunkered in the brush about thirty feet away. Ringbone could not even see him, the shadows were so dark.

Overhead, a nighthawk screeched, wings zooming.

Gardner and Carson and Fargo rode up-stream and hid their horses in the brush and came back on foot. They did not see Ringbone and Funeral. They settled on their haunches about twenty feet away, their backs to Ringbone and Funeral.

"Well, here we are," Fargo said.

"Nobody'll ever knew who bumped Ed Burnett off," Gardner said. "Of course, some people'll be suspicious—but what can they prove?"

"Nothin'," Carson said.

THE three ambushers carried rifles. When Ringbone and Funeral stepped out, the three came a-foot, rifles rising as they turned.

"Watch yourself!" Ringbone warned.

Funeral spat, said nothing. But his eyes never left the ambushers.

Gardner was the first to recover his composure. He looked at Ringbone's .45s, at Funeral's drawn pistols.

"What's this?" His voice was harsh, heavy, and showed his surprise.

"I could ask the same," Ringbone said.

"We was jus' settin' here—"

"Waitin' to ambush Ed Burnett," Ringbone finished drily. Then, to Funeral, he said: "The Widder worked it slick...."

Fargo blurted, "I tol' you that damn information was fishy, Gardner. Damn that woman!"

"Shut up!" Gardner snapped. He asked of Ringbone, "What can you prove in court?"

"Court, hell!" Fargo snapped. "What chance would an ex-con like me have in court? You're nuts!"

Fargo swung his rifle.

But Fargo never fired. Ringbone's bullet killed the gunman in his boots. Gardner and Carson went into action.

Powdersmoke. Gun-roar. Ringbone heard a bullet wham into a tree beside him. He saw Funeral—dark, lanky—fan his hammers.

Carson dropped his smoking rifle, walked forward two paces, fell. Gardner fired twice—rapidly, wildly. Then Gardner, too, was down.

The sound of the guns rolled across the barren hills, echoed loudly, then slowly died. Funeral knelt beside the men momentarily, then climbed to his stupendous height, his long face emotionless.

"All dead," he said. "You hurt, Ringbone?"

"No. An' you?"

"Nary a scratch. Sure bum shots."

"Let's get outa here," Ringbone said.

They mounted. Boxelder was dark when they rode in. They rubbed down their horses.

"Nobody seen us leave town," Ringbone said, "an' nobody seen us ride back. Nobody'll ever know we even left town tonight. They'll figure Gardner an' his two men got in a fight an' killed 'emselves off."

Funeral nodded. "Dunlap'll turn Ed loose when he hears Gardner's dead," the undertaker said. "Ed an' Connie'll get along fine now...." He spat. "Somebody'll fin' them dead men come daylight. I'll be plenty busy tomorrow—coroner's inquest, gettin' 'em ready for burial."

They parted in front of Ringbone's office.

"'Night, Funeral."

"'Night, Ringbone."

THE END

Here's Your Invitation to an Action-Crammed Suspenseful Gun-Party! Read:—

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In the September Issue of **DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN**

It didn't seem possible that lovely June Ellery was only a murderer's bait!

BOOTHILL BAIT

by EARL L. BRADNER

Young John Hale's world dropped out from under him when he found he was working for the man who'd murdered his father—but it was worse when he realized that what had seemed like an ideal set-up, what with June Ellery warming up to him, was a killer's cunning trap!

"WHO told you all this about my father?" John Hale demanded.

Old Paul Cullen grinned, his snagged-toothed mouth drooling tobacco juice into his dirty whiskers. "Huh!" he cackled. "Nobody don't need to tell me nothin'. Knowed yore dad thirty years ago. An' I'm tellin' you straight. Bill Ellery murdered yore dad. Shot him in the back. An' here you air, back in Arizona, punchin' cows fur Bill Ellery! Workin' fur the very man who murdered yore dad! Must heat him up enough to melt the quartz in the sile 'round about him! Yore dad was a fighter. An' he had a hot head. Though you was too young when Bill Ellery murdered him an' they carried you out of Arizona to remember anything about him, I reckon."

The old man paused, shoved against the cowpoke's knee, and said in a guarded voice, "Why don't you quit Bill Ellery an' his Rockin' E outfit an' jine in with Mark Anson, an' his Arrow A. Mark's goin' to clean out Bill Ellery an' his bunch anyhow. He's just got a new foreman, Sam Potter, who's a humdinger with a gun, an' plenty other gunslicks besides. Ain't no use bein' killed in this feud for a man who's murdered yore dad, is there?"

John Hale pulled loose from the evil-faced old man and rode away. His world seemed to be crashing around him. His fighting gray eyes were fixed somberly upon the tawny plain, a crease of deep thought between them. He was thinking of June Ellery. Had her dad murdered his father, as old Cullen had said? What could Bill Ellery mean, then, by employing the son if he had murdered the father? Hale felt that there was more than just employing. Ellery had actually encouraged him in his attentions to June.

John Hale was swept by a sudden surge of blazing anger. Old Ellery was just tolling him along. Ellery's Rocking E and Mark Anson's bigger Arrow A had locked horns just before he'd come back. Three men had died, two of them Rocking E's. The two outfits had started killing over the title of a track of land. The final hearing on this title was to come up soon. Old Ellery was trying to hold him just to have on his side another hotheaded young sucker who could sling a gun at the courthouse. The old man was using his only child, June, as bait!

What a fool he was to think that old Ellery was going to give his daughter and a sixty-thousand-acre ranch to a man he'd seen only a few months, whose rep was in Wyoming, even though he'd been born in that part of Arizona. Bah! Old Ellery was backing "Red" Gallatin, his foreman, a brutally-efficient thug, as a husband for June. And this blundering young fool who called himself John Hale was to be gunmeat. Hale swore softly as he tried to look at himself through the other fellow's eyes.

He could just remember his father, remember that he had died in a gun fight. But maybe old Cullen had lied about his killing. Maybe the old man was merely trying to get another shot for the Arrow A.

Hale's face set flintily. The only thing to do was to ride straight for the Rocking E, have it out with Bill Ellery. Have it out with June, too, if necessary. Hot-tempered Red Gallatin's red, truculent face and sandy hair burned before Hale for a moment.

THE sun was slanting low when John Hale gazed down into the valley where the buildings of the Rocking E nestled. June was down there. The old thrill at the thought of her started to pass over him. But he checked himself grimly. He might not come out of that valley alive. He might come out; but he might leave dead men behind him. Red Gallatin had been sweet on June. Well, if he couldn't have her and Red acted his usual ugly part, he'd see that Red couldn't have her either.

The cowpoke raised his bridle and started to touch spur when something came around a shoulder of rock. He identified the brightly marked pinto which June Ellery always rode, and a sense of bitter loss smote him. John Hale hesitated a second, then rode toward her.

She smiled as he approached, but her high-colored, oval face grew long as he rode nearer. "What's the matter? You look like you're seeing a ghost!" she said in a tense voice.

Then John Hale knew how weak human resolutions were. To save this girl, he changed his whole plan on the impulse of the moment. He avoided her question. "I'm sure glad I met you, June. Gives me a chance to say goodbye."

"Goodbye? Where are you going?"

A great desire swept him to put him arms around her, plead with her to go to Tombstone and marry him; to ride away to Wyoming with him. But he was jobless now, and owned little more than the pony he forked. For her sake he closed his mouth in a hard, pained line.

"Why are you going?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

Her beautiful, full lips drew down contemptuously for a moment. "I know why you're going. Because you're afraid! You know that the trial for that piece of land comes up at Tombstone soon. You think

there'll be shooting. So you're leaving while it's safe!" she said bitterly.

The injustice of the charge smote him into indignant silence.

HE wheeled his bronc, buried himself in the brush and the darkness. For the first few minutes he rode just to put distanee between himself and June. Then he drew up, fought a bitter battle. It was forced upon him that he still loved June Ellery, that he couldn't drive thoughts of her from his mind. And for that love he'd try to think no more of how his dad might have died. He'd forget old Bill Ellery. He'd head for Tombstone, then back for Wyoming.

But his black thoughts drummed through his soul as steadily as his pony's hooves drummed in his ears. He started to rein in at the first Tombstone saloon, checked his pony with a quick turn of his wrist. Two ponies at the rack had Arrow A brands. John Hale felt a sudden rush of heat through him at the sight of the hate mark. Again he saw the waxen faces of the two lead-torn Rocking E men.

"Hell!" he spat aloud in disgust at himself. What did the Rocking E's troubles mean to him now. "Damn the Rockin' E!" he thought.

He drew up sharply. His bronc had the Rocking E brand upon it. The feud between the two outfits was well known. Watching eyes were reading his movements. Tongues would say he was too yellow to come into the saloon after he'd seen the Arrow A brand shouting danger of blazing guns within. He'd have to show the world that John Hale wasn't afraid of two men with guns.

He closed his eyes a few seconds trying to get the pupils enlarged enough to take in objects immediately in the dim light when he stepped inside. Then he threw open the door, unconsciously projecting his head as he owled into the dim light.

"Hey, turtle, pull in your neck!" a thick voice spluttered.

Hale's eyes swept the room. There were three men in it, besides the barkeep. Th puncher's eyes came back to the speaker. He was a thick chap with a heavy chin that gleamed from a recent visit to the barber, while above it bristled a huge carroty mustache which appeared to have been waxed at the ends from the way they stood out. Hale recognized the type instantly. This was a soft-handed, make-believe cowpoke, really kept by the Arrow A as a gunman.

The man closest to him was grasshopper built, with gimlet eyes and long, nervous hands. "That's one of them Rockin' E fellers, Sam. They all neck out that way tryin' to dodge us before we see 'em," he said to the first speaker with a sneering laugh.

Sam regarded this statement with half drunken gravity. He hadn't been told to shoot this particular man at this particular time. Moreover, the liquor had completely unstabilized his emotions, made him feel good.

"What your name, hombre?" he asked.

"John Hale."

"Come on up, John, and wash the alkali out of your throat," Sam invited. "Move over, Fish," he said to his companion.

Hale hesitated for an instant. Line up with two Arrow A men and drink with them! But he wasn't a Rocking E man any longer. To hell with the Rocking E, old man Ellery, June, everything about it. He stepped up, lifted the glass which

Sam had ordered for him, took a swallow.

"How's water holdin' out on the Rockin' E?" Sam asked him.

"Don't know. I'm not workin' for the Rockin' E no more."

"Quittin', huh!" Sam slewed around to stare at Hale, and Hale saw that Sam was thinking he'd been fired, that he must be feeling hard against the outfit. Sam's chin gleamed as he thrust it forward doggedly. "Yeh, it's a good outfit to quit. Lousy outfit," he growled thickly.

Hale stiffened, relaxed. Why quarrel with a man about the Rocking E?

Sam leaned towards him, grasped his right arm in confidential drunkenness. "John, there's one mighty fine article on that Rockin' E, tho. That gal of old Ellery's."

Had Sam been a little less drunk he would have felt the sudden tensing that ran through the body of the man who was trying to forget, trying to shuck his past. But Sam failed to note it, went on heedlessly.

"Say, I saw that gal way out in the brush the other day. What you reckon she's doin' way out there?" Sam leaned closer, his eyes gleaming with lust and liquor, and finished with a vile suggestion as to why June Ellery might be riding through the chaparral.

John Hale's fist swung in an arc, thudded squarely against the shining mark of Sam's chin. Sam crashed backwards, the base of his skull striking across the footrail.

Instantly Hale slewed around towards Fish, while the third man dived for cover. Fish was slapping for his Colt. He was slowed a little by his drinks, and Hale beat him to the draw.

Fish's head leveled with his boots. The cowpoke who had dived out of line of fire sang out:

"Don't mix me with them rattlers, pardner! I belong to the Bradded Dash outfit, down near Charleston. But this is a mighty tough bunch you've stacked up against. That man you slammed with your fist has just been brought in out of that Lincoln County Cattle War by the Arrow A. He rode with Billy the Kid and Hendry Brown over there!"

Hale went over and leaned above the imported killer. "Just stunned. He'll snap out of it in a few minutes," he announced.

He glanced at Fish, whose face was turned up, and a sudden revulsion shook him. He'd have to finish Sam or get finished by him if he stayed here long. No more bloodshed for him. Hale strode through the door, swung upon his pony, hit north.

AT THE end of a couple of miles he checked his bronc's pace, rode irresolutely, glancing back at the little town. "Skunk!" he spat aloud, as his mind burned over what Sam had said about June Ellery. He ought to have slammed a bullet through Sam, a man who would say a dirty, lying thing like that about a girl, even when he was drunk! He kept twisting in his saddle, looking back, his face irresolute. He was fighting a desperate battle within.

June Ellery needed a friend to protect her name from swine like the Arrow A outfit. The spirit of protection for June began to glow within him. What a rotten outfit that Arrow A was, anyhow! Sam Potter's words were causing a new spirit of loyalty towards the Rocking E to stir in John Hale's soul.

He reviewed the men attached to the little spread. Bill Ellery was too

old to throw a gun fast enough to protect June. Red Gallatin. A look of mingled hate and jealousy settled blackly in Hale's face. Red Gallatin was out for the girl's money. He wouldn't be careful of anything about her, and he'd soon be treating her like a dog.

Then there was the girl's charge that he was running away from the gun battle that might soon come between her Rocking E and the Arrow A. This Sam Potter was a bad hombre who'd played a big part in New Mexico's range war, was he? He'd been brought in to slaughter Rocking E's. Well, this bad Sam Potter was unfinished business for him. John Hale set his jaws stubbornly, turned and rode straight for the saloon at Tombstone. He'd finish Sam off, stop one lying mouth.

There were no ponies in front of the saloon when Hale came in sight. Cautiously he pushed open the saloon door, to find the room empty, except for the barkeep.

"Where'd Potter go?" Hale asked.

"He come to just after you left. But he was mighty shook up. No wonder, seein' what his chin and the back of his head got! About the time he was gettin' empty of cuss words and talk about how he was goin' to do you, a rawhide from an outfit the other side of the Arrow A come in. Well, he got this feller to help him. They throwed the stiff across Potter's tree and lit out for the Arrow A. Potter said he was comin' back fur you, tho. And I reckon he'll do it. They say this Sam Potter is the best gunman in the Southwest."

THE puncher hung around for the next two days, bunking in the hay of Denny's Livery Stable, and looking for Sam Potter. No Sam showed up. But he'd come. Again Hale thought about that gross insult to June and burned hot. He poked his head out of the livery stable the third morning, gazed down the main drag.

A squad of riders was coming in against the sun. Hale stared hard. They were Rocking E's. That was old man Ellery riding stiffly there in front. And at his right towered the six-foot-three of Red Gallatin's rawboned frame. Then Hale's spurred brain recalled something he'd overheard Ellery say about receiving a bunch of longhorns here.

Tombstone was headquarters for the Arrow A. A gang of them might breeze in at any time. The Rocking E's knew it, were heavily hardwared; weren't stopping to cut the dust; were keeping to the middle of the street, riding slowly, heads swinging, eyes boring.

John Hale watched them from deep in the shadows, a flush upon his face as his eyes rested upon Red Gallatin. It would be darned easy to knock that brute out of the saddle, Hale mused. Then he would fog out the back door and get safe into Wyoming. He tried to persuade himself for a moment that he ought to shoot Red just to save June from him. Then Hale snarled guardedly at himself, "I'm no dirty, backshootin' bushwhacker!"

Red would have a mighty good chance of getting his anyhow, along with Bill Ellery, if Mark Anson and his gunnies got onto them being here in Tombstone.

Tombstone's holding ground was on the opposite side of town. The Rocking E's would be back in a couple of hours. Hale climbed to the loft, lay down in the hay, close to a big knothole. There was a

pretty good chance for something to rip loose soon.

The sun began to warm the shingles, send heat down against the hay. Hale half drowsed. The lusty yell of a cowboy riding herd jerked him back to attention. He peered out. The Rocking E riders were coming. Hale grinned sarcastically for a moment, for seven men were nursing only about sixty cows! Then his face straightened. Bill Ellery and Red Gallatin were good cowmen and fighters, too. He'd hand that to them. They'd brought along the extra men in case.

Hale twisted, looked eastward along the street, and gasped. A squad of men was riding in, eleven, Hale counted. That big, long-armed gorilla in front was Mark Anson himself. And he was sided by Sam Potter. John Hale's eyes began to shine in the semi-darkness as they rested upon Potter, and the words of Potter's insult to June Ellery scorched through him once more.

The rannie could see both sides tensing, almost felt their burning gazes as they slowed down, watching each other. It didn't look, however, as though the Arrow A had come gunning for the smaller squad, not this time. They began to string out in a thin line on one side of the street, to allow the Rocking E cows to pass.

But a spooky old mosshorn towards the lead suddenly let out a bellow, wheeled against the other cows, and began to plow back through them, bawling at every jump. The whole little herd stampeded. The mosshorn smashed into Sam Potter's pony, almost bowling it over. Sam's Colt boomed, and the cow fell in its tracks.

"You lousy bum!" Red Gallatin yelled, and the next instant his own gun cracked as he snapped a miss at Potter.

The shots and the rising smell of blood crazed the most sluggish of the cow brutes. The street became a raging torrent of bellowing cows and cursing, shooting men, scarce less crazed than the cows.

But because the herd was so small and so frightened, it had raced away in a few seconds, leaving the street free for the Rocking E and the Arrow A to battle it out in the clearing dust and without the cows as shields. Both sides began to spread promptly for shelter.

Hale saw old man Ellery wheel to ride into an alley where he could fight from behind the edge of a building. Ellery was too slow, however. Sam Potter's gun streaked flame, and the old man dropped from his saddle. But Ellery was game. He lay there for a moment, apparently stunned, and then Hale saw him begin to crawl painfully towards the shelter of a porch, his gun still clinched tightly in his hand. Half way to shelter he flattened, slung lead down the street. A sepia Arrow A half-breed wallowed dust as Ellery's bullet struck him.

But the shot seemed to have centered most of the Arrow A's eyes upon Ellery. Lead began to slant into the dust, spouting it upward in white powdery clouds.

"Hell!" John Hale raged aloud. An old man, the man he had worked for so long, the man who had treated him white in every deal, as far as he could prove, was being done to death by superior numbers of the hated Arrow A. And this man was the father of the girl he loved.

A bullet tore through the shoulder of the old man's jacket, flinging a little cloud of dust.

Hale gave a deep-chested snarl.

swarmed down the ladder, raced to the edge of the barn door. Mark Anson's boarish jowls loomed around the corner of a building a hundred yards down the street while Anson peered to get the result of his last shot at Ellery.

Loyalty and love hurled John Hale into action. He trembled with eagerness for a second, dropped to a sitting position, and rested his heavy Colt upon his knee. His lead smeared Anson out.

There was confusion among the Arrow A's for a moment, but only for a moment. They had lost three men, but they'd evened up that number with the Rocking E. And old man Ellery himself was now sheltered in the dark under the edge of a porch down there in front. The first business was to finish him off.

Sam Potter sung out an order. He and three other men dashed from shelter, came pounding along the street, spurting lead under the porch as they came.

Hale got to his feet, his gun bucking. He missed Sam Potter, who was flattened tight against his pony's neck. But the bullet smashed another man from his tree, and at the same instant a lucky shot from far down the street by a Rocking E emptied a second saddle.

Sam Potter caught sight of Hale in the livery stable door, his gun smoking. He was more dangerous that the crippled Ellery, Potter must have thought; for instantly he charged straight at Hale, his face twisted with hate, his eyes gleaming with the lust of battle.

Hale fired, felt a smashing blow along the side of his face just as he pulled trigger.

THE next two or three minutes were blurred. Hale seemed to hear shots, the pounding of ponies' hooves. His head began to clear. He put up his hand to the left side of his face, where an infernal pain wracked him, brought it away red with blood. Sam Potter sprawled just without the door, dead enough. But Potter had grooved his jaw for him, fracturing it with his last shot.

Hale wobbled to his feet, peered cautiously out. Dead men lay in the street, and up it Rocking E men were sticking out their necks from shelter. It looked like the Rocking E had won.

Hale could just make out Bill Ellery painfully dragging himself from under the porch. He gazed absorbedly at Ellery trying to make out how badly he was hurt.

The puncher's attention was jerked away from Ellery. Somebody was easing open a crack of the livery stable's back door! Hale spun around, jerking up his six-gun while his heart seemed to jump into his throat. A hand was shoving through the crack. And that hand held a Colt which was lining towards him. Hale's mind geared in high. He estimated instantly where the body of the Colt's owner must be, splintered lead through the door.

The man's gun roared, and the rannie felt it swirl air beside his face. But the fellow was slumping down. Hale crouched, his six-shooter rigidly upon the door. There might be another Arrow A man out there. But there was no hit of sound or motion behind the door. The rannie unkinked a bit, moved unsteadily towards it, shoved it open.

"Thunderation!" he mumbled.

He was looking into Red Gallatin's dead face!

For a moment Hale stared unbelievingly. "So! When we'd finished with the Arrow A's, you tried to

kill me!" he thought. "You sure must have wanted June bad, or even as dirty dog as you are wouldn't have tried to shoot me in the back! I've saved her from you, anyhow! Ellery held on to you because you could do things. But you failed in tryin' to pot me!"

THE next Hale knew he was lying on something hard, a ceiling blurringly coming into his consciousness. An old, bewhiskered chap, who looked like he might be a doctor, was peering at him through his spectacles.

"How'm I makin' it, Doc" the puncher mumbled.

"Oh, you're all okay. Jarred up and lost some blood. But you'll pull thru," the doctor answered, brow puckered. "What's your name?"

"John Hale."

"I thought it might be Hale. You know, I worked on Sam Hale when he was shot over at Gayleyville. You look like you might be his son."

John Hale raised himself in spite of the doctor's restraining hand. "I am his son. Who shot him, Doc?" he mumbled.

The doctor avoided an exact answer. "He was in a fight with Bill Ellery. I knew them both well. But I've lost track of everybody, having just come back to Arizona after being away for fifteen years. But I recognized you from your dad."

"Was it a square fight, Doc?"

The doctor caught the note of consuming interest in the cowpoke's voice. Age had made him cautious, and for a moment he hesitated. "Yes. And your dad started it," he said.

"Say that again, Doc! My dad started it! And it was a fair fight!"

"That's what I said. But listen, boy. Your dad was shot in the back during the fight by Bud Dorner. Guess I can tell that now, for Bud died in the penitentiary last year. Bud wasn't tied up with Ellery in any way. He just grabbed the chance to murder your dad when he thought nobody was looking at him. Shot your dad in the back!"

THE rannie slipped off the table, dodged the doctor's clutch, lunged through the door. There was but one other doctor in town, Hale was telling himself.

Old Ellery was sitting propped up in a chair, his face white but his long, wolfish jaw set.

June Ellery, who had ridden in behind the squad to do some buying of her own, hovered over him.

John Hale began to mumble with the eagerness of a man shoving from his lips a cup of deadly poison. "Mr. Ellery, an old doctor down the street says he was present when—when dad and you locked horns. He says it was a fair fight and that dad really started it. He says that while you and dad were gunnin' for each other a man by the name of Bud Dorner shot dad in the back."

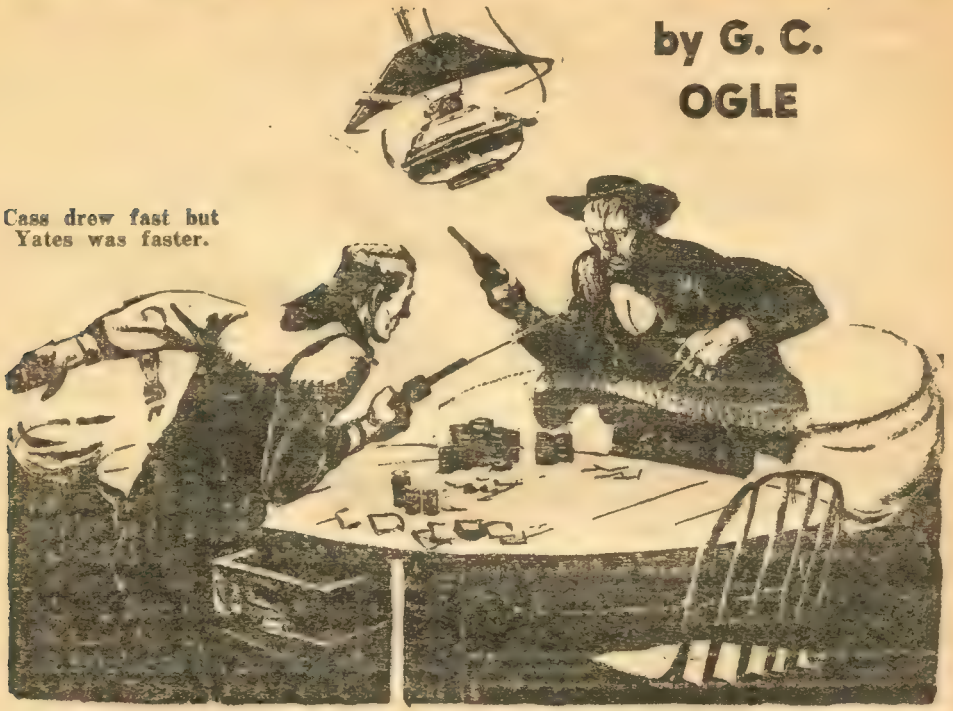
"Thank God!" old man Ellery breathed fervently. "I was drunk, John, when that fight started, or it sure wouldn't have happened at all. And I was never sure just how it was. Thought, maybe, I had shot your dad in the back. He was the whitest man I ever knowed. Best friend I ever had. His death has been ridin' me ever since. I've been tryin' to make it up to you, boy. You're Sam Hale's son. You're the same fine breed as your dad."

John Hale's eyes met June Ellery's, and she reached out her hand to him.

"Guess I needn't worry none about what's goin' to become of my gal and the ranch!" the old man chuckled feebly.

APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH

by G. C. OGLE



Cass drew fast but Yates was faster.

"Why don't you give over yore wild ways, Cass?" asked old Judd. "Yore heart's still white." But Cass Hollister knew he'd traveled too far along the owlhoot trail to turn back now—but there was one thing he could do; keep an appointment with death in Oro Fino and save his brother from riding down with him!

CASS HOLLISTER straddled the sorrel and listened to his pard's instructions quietly. Smoke jetted in twin blue-gray streams from his thin, arched nose. He tossed the half-smoked quirly to the ground nervously and stared in slow appraisal at Slim Yates. He noted how his pard's black eyebrows were drawn down in an uneasy, hesitant frown, and that his flat, glittery eyes flickered shiftily as he warned for the tenth time:

"Remember, we gotta work fast. Once in th' clear, we'll separate. Then we'll meet in Oro Fino in exactly ten days. Same as usual. In th' Stuck Pig. If we're alive. Let's go!"

He stepped aboard his blaze-faced bay.

"Okey-doke," replied Cass. His saturnine, hawk's face screwed into a devil-may-care smile, and his green eyes narrowed sardonically. "An' try not tuh go off half-cocked this time, Slim," he bantered. "We got enough blood on our black souls now."

The words were drawled lazily. But Cass saw Slim's blood pile up thunder black in his pale, heaving face. Then

his pard jerked the bandana mask up over his ears.

Cass figured Slim had the fastest draw in the State. He hoped he never had to try to beat it. But Slim was too willing to trigger powder smoke lately. He was depending on it more and more. And using his brains less. Cass held that even the owlhoot should use their heads for more than Stetson pegs.

It was two minutes before ten when the two masked bank specialists whirled their broncs and slammed fast down the road. They roared into town, hunched low and feeding their ponies steel at exactly ten. There was barely a handful of loafers in sight. Not much material for a posse, Cass gloated.

As the little cow-town's bank doors opened, the two sprang from their ponies and darted across the board walk. The fat was in the fire now. They had to work fast. Their lives depended on that. For sudden death was grinning over their shoulders.

They shouldered into the cool inside gloom. Slim slashed down at the janitor's head with his gun barrel as the fellow bent to hook his doors back. The polished copper barriers clashed shut again as the man sagged down unconscious.

The two vaulted over the counter —six-guns centered on the cashier and his two tellers who cowered in abject terror.

"Quick! This is a stick-up!" snarled Slim. "Open thet vault!" His teeth were chattering like castanets. The flustered old cashier dragged on the heavy steel door. Slowly it swung open. He stood peering into the darkness behind. Then he crumpled down in a dead faint! He was sprawled across his baled currency, seemingly still trying to protect his trust.

"Git outta my way, you fool!" snarled Slim. Even as Cass bent down to grab the cashier's foot and drag him out, Slim's .44's were spitting flaming death. "Ah-ah-eek!" he sighed, his breath wheezing in his throat. "I had tuh do it, Cass."

"Sez you!" sneered Cass. "Got th' wind up?"

Like the clang of Hell's bellweather leading his flock, a burglar alarm tore loose on the morning air. "See?" screeched Slim. "It's a plant!" He whirled, and a gun-flash blossomed at his hip. The teller who had his finger pressed on the electric button sagged down clutching at his middle. The din of the shrilling alarm died out instantly.

Slim charged the counter. He scooped up a dozen rolls of pennies and bolted out.

Cass dragged the dead cashier back. Then he squatted in the vault, his back to the counter and six-guns on the floor. Quickly he scooped the baled, blood-spattered currency into a washed flour sack.

THEN he vaulted the counter and dashed outside into the day's bright glare. He expected to face Hell's commotion. His prick-eared pony nickered softly in recognition. Slim was powing out of town as fast as he could work horse-flesh. A citizen darted out of the feed stable and squatted business-like behind the watering trough. He cranked a shell into his .45-90, and the old buffalo gun boomed her defiance at the fleeing bandit. A puff of dust splashed up beside Slim's pony.

The citizen managed to work another shot before Cass winged him with a snap shot, even as he boarded his bronc. He kneed his sorrel around, intending to dart up the alley. But a ragged volley of gunfire

spearing from open doors and from behind ash barrels met him as he rowelled into its narrow gut. Lead tugged at his Stetson and whispered past his ears before he could swerve out of the death trap.

Cass turned his back on Slim and spurred north. The sullen thunder of guns still clamored loud. A plunging shot from an upper story window seared his thigh before tearing down into the sorrel's barrel. The death-struck brute screamed horribly. Then it fell to its knees and rolled over. It coughed bright crimson blood, flecked with foaming bubbles.

Even as the pony sagged, Cass leaped from its back. He high-stilted it for a tied black. Still clutching fast to the flour sack, he knifed a keen, desperate glance behind him. The angling fire from the alley was cut off for the moment. But his time was short. Soon a swarm of enraged citizens would vomit out of its depths with iron in their fists. He threw a random, chance shot into the upper room where the concealed sniper again levered his Winchester. There was a crash of broken glass and a scream. Cass toed the black's stirrups and leaned forward in the saddle.

Not until later did Cass learn that the black belonged to the sheriff. He let the powerful brute stretch out and pound the gumbo. Soon the tumult and confusion died away. Cass had faded back into mesquite-blanketed hummocks and disappeared.

TEN days later Cass pulled the black to a halt in front of his brother's ranch house. He was a hundred miles from the scene of the bank robbery. And it was ten miles to Oro Fino, where he had an appointment to meet Slim that night. He intended to keep it. But it would be the last. Slim was too nervous-triggered. And he was acting jealous lately. From now on Cass intended to ride the owlhoot trail alone.

His wary green eyes flickered over the familiar old dwelling with customary caution. They rested on the front door. He expected to see his brother or his sister-in-law come out and greet him.

But there was no opening door or friendly hail. Only an ominous silence that hung heavy. Aged cottonwoods leaned down close to the house. But the grateful shade they loaned only dappled the ground beneath. Their leaves were scanty and yellowed. They rustled thinly, as vagrant puffs of air, hot as a furnace blast, sighed up the Gila, and stirred their branches. For Bear's Paw branch was dry, so their thirsty roots inched down in vain. It was the dryest season in twenty years.

Overhead the hot August sun blazed down in unrelenting fury out of noon-day's brassy bowl. Cass ran up the six steps to the broad porch. He entered the unlocked front door. The littered, untidy house told him his brother was batching. Glancing out the window, he saw old Judd Pease limping across to the bunkhouse.

"Hi there, Judd!" he hailed. "Where's everybody?"

The old foreman's face drained white and his face worked. He lumbered over to the house on bowed legs that had been fractured a dozen times riding for the A-Bar-H spread. Old Ames Hollister had pioneered it before Cass was even born. And he was ten years older than his brother Ward. But Judd had been there from the beginning. So he considered him-

self responsible for the outfit being kept out of hell's hot clutches.

Judd's face was working with fury as he entered the kitchen. His little light blue eyes were smoking as he rasped: "We heerd yuh was dead, yuh devil's brand. It's a pity yuh ain't! An' how dast yuh slink back here? Yore dead paw was an honest man! He'd turn in his grave if he knew 'bout yore black sinful ways. He—he—" Rage choked the old foreman.

"Easy there, Judd!" cautioned Cass. A crooked smile tore loose on his hawk's face and his lips thinned dangerously. "Take it slow, feller. Tell me th' trouble thet's got a noose on yuh."

He was not too surprised. There are always tale-tellers and busybodies who guess more than they know, and then run to spread their smearing rumors. But Cass felt a stab of shamed regret. Until now, nobody at the ranch knew he rode the furtive owlhoot shadows with Slim. They were believed to be honest cattle dealers.

"Yore th' trouble!" yelled Judd, glaring his hate. He grabbed the kitchen axe and charged headlong down on Cass! "But I'll settle yore hash, yuh murderin', robbin' rat!" The rusty, blunt-edged old weapon swung high. Then it slashed down, as Judd tried with all his might to split Cass's skull.

Cass slipped aside, to stand on easy-balanced feet, watching. The axe smashed on the floor boomingly. Judd was thrown off balance and piled up against the heavy cast iron stove. He was stunned by the impact.

Cass picked him up and placed him in a chair. Then he wiped the blood from Judd's split forehead as the foreman struggled back to consciousness.

"Now tell me what's wrong around here," he said in a dead, tired voice. "This is th' last time you'll ever see me. So jist fergit what you've heard, an' spill th' dope. Where's Ward's wife, and his kid?"

Judd screwed up his little eyes and winked back the tears. "Mebbe I was a leetle hasty," he admitted. "But things hez shorely gone tuh hell lately. Miz Rose hez taken leetle Johnny tuh th' Coast. Ward rustled up th' money tuh send 'em, tight as it is. Claimed th' heat was gittin' 'em down. But they looked peart enough tuh me. Pearter'n Ward, anyway. He's worried sick 'bout his overdue int'rest on th' mortgage. Fer our cow critters air all ganted up from th' drouth. An' we ain't got a waddy left."

"Why?" asked Cass.

"No pesos tuh pay 'em with," replied Judd succinctly.

"Does—does Rose know about me?" Cass faltered.

"Hell yes!" replied Judd bitterly. "Th' hull county knows!"

CASS felt stunned. His adored sister-in-law knew his black trade! But he could still give Ward a helping hand. He slapped the stuffed money belt hidden beneath his shirt, and croaked: "I'd rather be dead than have her know. But I kin let Ward have enough tuh straighten things out. So yuh kin cheer up, Judd."

Sixty one-hundred-dollar bills were stuffed in that eelskin. Cass had made them fairly as a cattle dealer. It was the only honest money he possessed. He'd made it before he met Slim and learned there were faster ways to get hundred dollar

bills. So he treasured them. Some day they would give his nephew a start. But right now Ward needed them.

Five-year-old Johnny was as dear to him as the son he'd never had. Nor never would have now. For a deep underlying streak of decency doomed him to ride life's trail alone. He figured no killer herding with the owlhoot had a right to bring sons into the world. For they'd stand a good chance of being orphaned by lead retribution, belching from the iron of a pursuing posse before they were as old as Johnny.

Judd's rough splattering laugh clapped against his ears and brought him out of his reverie. "We don't need yore blood-spattered money!" the foreman sneered scornfully. "We'll make out tuh keep th' ole A-Bar-H floatin'! She's weathered worse storms'n this!"

"But it's honest money!" Cass whispered, half to himself.

Not like the currency stuffed in a flour sack out there in the alforjas behind his saddle! Cass didn't even know how much there was in the sack! He hadn't bothered to count it. Perhaps thirty thousand dollars. By his strict code, half of it belonged to Slim. Even if he had ran out on him. For Slim was his pard until tonight. And the money was spotted with blood, as Judd had sneered. Cass still figured they'd both got away slick as a whistle if Slim hadn't got jumpy and blasted down on the fear-palsied cashier.

There was no use arguing with Judd. He'd have to find Ward and get things straightened out. Then he'd vamoose for good. "Let it lay," he said wearily. "Where's Ward?"

"Him an' Mister Yatez hez rid down tuh town tuhday," replied Judd grumpily. "An' if it's any of yore business, they figger tuh call at th' bank an' raise money."

"What?" yelled the startled Cass. He hadn't considered the possibility of Slim's holding up at his brother's ranch.

Judd smiled with malicious pleasure. He thought Cass was surprised because Ward had found a way out of his difficulties. "Yep, they intended callin' at th' bank early. Orghter be home any time now. Ward said Mister Yates had some collateral thet would be good fer what we need."

The cold green fury in Cass's eyes awed Judd into silence. Splinters of fire licked out of their burning wells. The stunned foreman quailed beneath their tigerish, baleful glare. A flood of dark crimson poured into Cass's face. Then it swiftly ebbed, leaving only two bright thin crescents high on his thin cheeks.

"So Ward an' Slim Yates hev gone tuh town," he said casually. But there was an ominous quality in the rasping, steely undertones. "An' they air goin' tuh call on a banker an' raise money on Slim's collateral. Now ain't thet somethin'! Yuh fat-brained ole mossy-horn! Slim Yates is Hell's choicest blowfly!"

"I—I don't believe it!" stammered Judd.

"I SWEAR by Damnation's eyeballs thet it's true!" cursed Cass. "An th' only collateral he'll show thet banker'll be a pair o' matched .44's with seven notches on 'em! Thet's true, too!"

"But Mister Yates is th' one who warned us agin you!" Judd whispered through frozen lips. "Told us how yuh went wrong an' j'ined th' owlhoot in spite of his pleadin'. He

thinks yore dead. Who—who am I tuh believe?"

"Believe who yuh like!" gritted Cass. He was already running for his pony. "But I'm j'nin' Slim Yates an' his new recruit tuh th' army of th' damned! If Ward's ketched he'll pay a hangin' price. Pay fer me an' Slim's powder-burnin', nervous past!" He flung the words over his shoulder bitterly.

He was stepping aboard the black, when Judd staggered out. The old man was numbed and shaken. "Honest, Cass?" he faltered. "Swear by yore father's name yore tellin' me th' truth!"

"Sure I'll swear!" cursed Cass. "Hell! I'm Slim's pard!" He leaned forward in the saddle and raked the black's flanks bloodily. A brutal, mirthless grin twisted his handsome features.

The pony lunged into a low-stretched run. His drumming hooves kept time with the fast-hammering heart of his rider. Cass swore that Slim would pay the price for enticing Ward outside the pale of the law. Ward was a married man. The father of little Johnny.

Cass had no plan. Only to save Ward. He didn't care what happened to himself. For he'd given his best years to the owlhoot. He was sick of his uneasy, frustrated life. Forever on the dodge. Forever harried by tin-star gun-slingers.

The long-ringing crash of gunfire came rolling back out of the shimmering heat waves ahead. With his heart in his mouth, Cass fogged around a mesquite-blanketed hummock. It stood like a brooding sentinel where the A-Bar-H trail joined the county road connecting Red Gulch and Oro Fino.

Ward was lying face down in the hot dust. Little whirlwinds of yellow powder spiraled up from his blue lips as he noisily sucked, then expelled air from his shallow-breathing lungs.

From the Oro Fino direction the sound of a hard-ridden pony's thudding hooves drifted back on the sullen air. He was sure sifting sand as his ratting rider speared fast away after dragging treacherous iron and shooting a pard in the back! And left him lying for the law men to find!

Cass leaped down and edged in warily. Ward still clutched his claybank's reins. Slowly Cass inched in, cutting across the inside of the circle. He gradually extended his arm as he moved closer. The sweat-sodden, dust-caked bronc gave one final snort of indecision. Then he stood quietly on spraddled legs.

Cass took the reins from his brother's clenched fist. Cold chisel glints lanced out of his green eyes. "Why, th' dirty, murderin' rat!" he sobbed. "Th' stinkin', polluted sidewinder! I'll kill him fer this day's work!"

Ward groaned and opened fever-hunted eyes. He stared in disbelief. "Is—is thet you, Cass?" he groaned. "Er-er yore ghost?"

"It's me, right enough," Cass answered grimly. He worked swiftly, bandaging the hole that spilled gouts of blood that slowly welled from Ward's shoulder. Ward had a chance for life. But he'd have to have a doctor's care.

And hang-rope retribution was dogging his heels. For Ward groaned: "Cass, I'm in an awful fix! Me an' Slim held up th' bank. An' —an' he shot th' cashier dead! Now he's dropped th' hammer of his six-gun on me, an' is lammin' fer Oro Fino with a sack o' currency. He—

he's layin' th' deadwood on me, an' sneakin' out!"

"Why?" asked Cass tensely. Slim had never double-crossed a pard before.

"I DUNNO," muttered Ward. "Unless— Cass, I gotta funny hunch! I think he wants Rose!"

"Any reasons?" asked Cass.

"Not reely," admitted Ward. "Only— Why did he rat on yuh? An' why did he git me in this jam?"

"Yuh helped cut yore slab o' misery pie," replied Cass a little coldly. "You didn't have to help Slim hold up no bank."

"Cass," said Ward earnestly, "I didn't know Slim was goin' tuh hold up thet bank! I swear it! I admit I needed money bad. But not that bad!"

"What do you mean?" asked Cass hoarsely.

"Slim offered tuh raise money fer me on some bonds he had," Ward explained. "So we rode down tuh Red Gulch, where I bank. It's only a leetle one-man outfit. So we walked in, an' I introduced Slim to th' cashier. An' Slim took a quick gander tuh see if anybody was around before he snarled: 'Stick 'em up, feller!' I thought at first it was a joke. But it wasn't. Slim shoved th' cashier intuh th' vault an' shot him. Then he scooped up some currency an' ran out. An'—an', Ward! I was so surprised an' half scared I didn't know what to do! So I just ran out after him. Nobody noticed us particularly. But they'll remember. An'—an' I'll git hanged fer somethin' I didn't do. I can't save th' ole spread now. An' —an' lettle Johnny'll — he'll be ashamed of me all his life." Sobs wrenched the stricken man's weary frame.

It all added up and made sense to Cass. Ward would be found shot, a brother to a known outlaw, specializing in bank robberies. The law would naturally connect the two. Slim would have an alibi. Ward would hang. Then the rat would pour his lying, traitorous condolences into Rose's ears. "Th' dirty son o' Judas!" Cass swore to himself.

Then Cass' hard, saturnine features moulded into a look of high decision. "They is a way out, Ward!" he swore. "An' we're takin' it! Stop askin' questions. You'll need all yore strength fer what's ahead. Now put yore arm around my neck. That's th' boy!"

Cass strained to his feet, lifting Ward's limp weight. Somehow he got his brother into the saddle and back to the ranch-house. It was a brutal, cruel ride. Ward was slumped down, babbling at the finish. Only the dally rope snugged to his wrists and half-hitched to the saddle horn kept him from spilling out of the hull. But it had to be made. For a posse was drumming fast behind them. And it brought stretch-neck justice.

Cass imagined he could smell the posse's sweaty ponies as he hazed the claybank into the home yard. He only had a chance if they weren't too close behind.

"Quick, Judd!" Cass snapped, as the foreman limped out and looked at Ward with stricken eyes.

"Judas Priest!" he croaked. "Is— is he daid?"

"No!" rasped Cass. "But he will be, if yuh don't hurry! Him an' Slim robbed th' bank. Slim slug-butchered th' cashier as usual. Tryin' tuh make his collateral stand up. Then th' rattin' skunk whanged down on Ward an' slunk off tuh hide his slimy karkass. Takin' all th' loot. Ward has tuh have a doctor. An' they's a posse breathin' on our necks. So

rope me th' best cayuse in th' corral an' have him here in a minit. I'll give yuh yore orders then!"

Cass eased his brother to the ground. Ward only groaned weakly. His eyes were blank, as he muttered to himself. "It'll depend on Judd's savvy after I leave," thought Cass bleakly. "But he's spent a lifetime fightin' fer us Hollisters. I don't believe he'll fail us now. Ward's th' biggest risk. He's out of his head. Mebbe he'll spill th' beans if somebody's sharp enough tuh ketch on. But I gotta chance it."

OUT of the corner of his eye, Cass glimpsed the foreman bow-legging it to the corral. Judd's expert hands built a loop in his dally rope round as a dollar. Then it dropped over the head of a grulla pony who reared and plunged as the ancient cow-prod fisted in on his riata. Then Judd had the grulla by the ear, and a hackamore on his jug head before Cass had loosed the cinches of his Miles City rig on the sheriff's black.

Judd bit down hard on the roman-nosed brute's near ear. He only had four yellowed snags remaining to chomp vittles with. But their nip was effective. So the grulla only rolled the whites of his eyes as he stood quiet while Cass slapped his rig on and heaved hard on the cinches.

"He's Satan's step-child," Judd cracked. "But th' critter kin shorely ramble. I reckon thet's what yore wantin'?"

"Yes," replied Cass briefly. "I reckon yuh tumble tuh my play? Thet I'm substitutin' fer Ward from here on?"

"I ketch," answered Judd soberly. "Th' posse air tuh believe Ward wouldn't stand fer yuh borrerin' a fresh pony. So yuh got plumb hasty. When them rabid hombres lam up, I'm busy bandagin' Ward, an' cussin' you an' Slim, an hollerin' fer a doctor. I'll make it stand up, if I have tuh lie myself hip deep in brimstone!"

"Yuh git it," said Cass. He knelt by Ward's side. Salty tears scalded his defiant green eyes. He fisted them hastily away. "Goodbye, Ward," he whispered chokingly. "An' good luck. Take keer of Rose an' leetle Johnny."

Cass unbuckled the eelskin money belt and handed it to Judd. "Here's six thousand dollars in big bills, Judd. It's honest money. As honest as you are. I swear it! Please take it. And use it tuh protect what scraps o' decency our father's name still has. Keep Ward ridin' th' straight an' narrow from here out. Er I'll ride back from Hell's slaverin' jaws an' name yuh fer a quitter. Swear yuh will, Judd!"

"I swear," said Judd quietly. His little light blue eyes gazed levelly back into Cass' lambent green ones. "Why don't yuh give over yore wild ways, Cass?" he asked. "Yore heart's still white."

The hounds of hell gnawed at Cass' vitals. Remorse, fear and despair each took its bitter bite. If he could only turn back the clock of Time. But he knew it was too late. "I wish I could, Judd," he croaked through set white lips. But th' owlhoot's brand is burned too deep. An' I still got an appointment in Oro Fino." He held out his slim brown hand. "Will yuh shake, Judd?"

Judd's gnarled paw closed over Cass'. Thus he paid tribute to the man he'd cursed as a traitor an hour before. "Fergive me," he pleaded. "If yore paw's lookin' down, he'll understand, an' fergive us both. He

allus thought th' world of yuh. Claimed you'd never fail th' A-Bar-H. An' yuh haven't failed it tuhday."

It was time to go. Down in the valley the posse's jaded ponies were painting a dun dust cloud against the sky's brassy backdrop. Cass realized a mighty smart hombre was leading them. They'd picked up the trail quick and followed fast. But he still had details to attend to.

He slid a pearl-handled .44 from its thonged down holster with a smooth draw. He fanned the hammer. Five slugs spattered the front of the ranch house. "Got tuh make it look natcheral," he grinned crookedly at Judd. "Th' sixth slug's reposin' in Ward's brisket—if anybody's curious enough tuh tally up." He restuffed the cylinder. He hastily jerked saddle and bridle from Ward's claybank and flung them on the corral rail. "They look natcheral there," he said. The pony nudged into the center of the cavvy. There were several bays in the corral. One of them could pass for Slim's. The sheriff's black would be recognized. Two and two would make four. The posse would believe the same pair who pulled the job ten days ago had struck again in Red Gulch.

THE thunder of running ponies came closer. The yell of an excited posseman split the hot air like a butcher's cleaver. The dust cloud was fanning out to surround the homestead.

"Hadn't yuh better git tuh goin'?" demanded the anxious Judd. "They air gittin' mighty clost!"

Again Cass straddled leather. "Remember, Judd!" he warned in final admonition. "Both them gun-slammin' killers came through here. Yuh knew 'em both. An—an' Slim Yates blasted down on Ward when he objected tuh 'em borrerin' fresh hawse flesh. Stick tuh yore story through thick an' thin. An—an'— Hell, Judd! Yuh can't smear my name no worse'n it is already. Do—do yore best fer Ward. So-long, ole timer!"

Judd leaped back. "Good luck," he croaked in farewell. The grulla bawled his rage and whirled. He sunfished and came down hard. Cass raked him with the hooks. The wall-eyed brute speared up the valley's baked-gumbo floor in a long-stretched, space-devouring run. As the pony whirled, Cass cuddled the pearl-handled .44 again and emptied all six chambers. Judd howled in genuine alarm as the first slug knocked his sombrero off. He flung himself flat on the ground and listened to the others zinging past like super-charged hornets. A brief smile creased his leathery old face. "Guess Cass is makin' it look natcheral," he whispered to himself. The posse pounded up and he started yelling.

A second later the trailing pack caught their first sight of Cass. A dozen parched throats bawled their rage. The blood-lust yell rang wide beneath the brassy sky. A dozen fists jerked iron. The slop and whine of low-pitched slugs reached for the grulla with searing fingers. But the vicious, jug-headed brute raced through the storm of lead untouched. Cass almost believed he was outrunning the whining bullets. Judd had told the truth when he said he was a running fool.

Cass circled into Oro Fino as dusk fell. He had an appointment with Slim Yates and death. In a room over the Stuck Pig. More than pigs had had their throats cut in that frowsty, oath-racked booze-ken. It

was a prime hide-out for those who burned smoke for the devil. Slim would be there, knowing Cass would keep his appointment if he still breathed fresh air. But Slim wouldn't know that Cass had discovered his black treachery.

Cass realized that he could dry-gulch his ratting pard. But it wasn't his style. Slim had to know why he was dying. Because he'd led Ward into a trap. Then left him to die in the hot dust while he slunk off with the loot. Slunk off and left a pard lying in the hot dust for the posse to find, so that his family would be burned with infamy's brand. And for one other thing. It hurt worse than all. Slim had ratted to Rose, turning her against Cass. But it didn't matter so much now. Slim would never leave the Stuck Pig alive.

Cass shivered. He believed Slim owned the fastest draw in the state. He was certain he couldn't beat it. So he had to make certain preparations.

The grulla pony jogged up Oro Fino's one mean street. False-fronted shacks spewed out and sucked in their quota of the idle and vicious. The Stuck Pig crouched down behind yellowed cottonwoods like an unlovely old drab. Its paint was cracked and peeling, and its blank, uncurtained windows were like staring eyes.

CASS took one last lingering look at the star-hung desert sky. He wondered if dreams might come true on those far-distant, glittering worlds. Soon he might know.

An hour later Cass bellied up to the Stuck Pig's bar. Slim lounged up beside him. "I been waitin' fer yuh," he snarled, his mean white face heaving. "Got th' dinero? Er was yuh too skeered tuh pick it up?"

Cass' lips tugged upward in a dangerous curl. His cold green eyes measured the flat, glittery ones, set too close together, in slow appraisal. "Nope, I wasn't too skeered, Slim," he answered. "Was yuh?" The mocking insult in his tones was thinly veiled.

"Yuh know I wasn't!" cursed Slim. "But it looked like a plant!"

"Then yuh still got yore jag o' pennies?" Cass asked, and Slim's face flushed dark at the remembrance. "But what th' hell's a few pennies between pards like us?" Cass sneered openly. "I'll see yuh in room eleven."

As the door to room eleven squeaked open, Cass shivered. It was the showdown. The old owlhoot payoff. Where the man who could center iron the fastest took the bets.

Slim swaggered in. He made no pretensions to gratitude. "Well, fork out my share," he sneered. I gotta date with a high-steppin' senorita. An' she thinks money's made tuh burn. But she's my style. Hot and stormy. I want tuh lam tuh th' Coast with plenty of th' long green, so let's git down tuh brass tcaks."

"It's in thet flour sack," Cass replied. "But I got somethin' tuh tell yuh afore yuh reach fer it."

Slim's greedy eyes had darted at the sack carelessly tossed on the battered bureau. But now they swivelled back to Cass. "What's eatin' yuh?" he demanded. "Tired uh takin' orders from me, cow trader?"

"Mebbe," allowed Cass. "But thet ain't all."

"I spoze yore figgerin' tuh git tough," sneered Slim. "Go ahead, an' cut yoreself a hunk o' misery pie, yuh second rate gun-slammer!"

"I'm cuttin' fer both of us, yuh

yeller-bellied, slimy snake!" cursed Cass. "I'm wise tuh th' hull rotten deal yuh handed Ward!"

"What deal?" purred Slim. The killer's gleam was making up in his flat, glittery eyes. His talons were ready to dart down to his holstered iron.

"Lettin' yore disgustin' eyes center on Rose!" snarled Cass, white with fury. "Rattin' on me! Plannin' thet bank stickup in Red Gulch tuh drag my father's good name still deeper in th' dust. Tryin' tuh hang yore mean killin' of thet pore cashier on Ward by slug-butcherin' him afore yuh slunk off tuh hide. Yuh thought I'd never know. But yore wrong!"

"So what?" sneered Slim.

"So yuh gotta die!" gritted Cass. "Now! Yuh'll be hammerin' at Hell's gates in lessen a minit! Fog yore iron!"

"Th' hell you say!" snarled Slim. And Cass slapped for his iron. But Slim made his strike and shot before Cass' guns had slid across their holster's lips. Those black, matched .44's spewed death even as they leaped from leather.

Cass sagged to the floor. He clutched his middle. He knew for sure now whose drag was the fastest. He was vomiting blood. His .44's clattered to the floor. He was too weak and numbed to fist them up.

"Smart guy, hey?" he sneered.

"Smarter'n you," Cass gasped. "I'm dyin' with a pard's lead in my brisket. But you'll die by hangin'. Choked tuh death!"

"Sez who!" jeered Slim. Then his heaving face blanched toad-belly white! For the pounding roar of many feet rumbled up the stairway! A pistol butt banged for admittance on the door.

"Open that door!" a rough voice bellowed in preemptory demand. "An' come out with yore paws grabbin' high!"

"Who—what?" croaked Slim. His eyes darted like snakes.

"Th'—th' sheriff!" Cass gasped. He managed to bluff a small crooked smile. "He—he's comin' fer you, Slim. Tuh—tuh hang yuh!"

SLIM grabbed the flour sack. He stood for a second like a cornered weasel. Then he darted to the window. He squeezed his head and shoulders through, his hands gripping the sill.

His involuntary upward shove on the half-open sash spelled Slim's doom. For it sprung the trigger that sent three hundred pounds of scrap iron hurtling down outside the window! It was tied to Cass' dally rope. That led up through a well pulley fastened to a naked outside rafter, then back down to the noose spread outside the window. When Slim thrust his head out the window, it was also through that dally rope's smooth-built circle. But he didn't know it. Not until the weight dropped, jerking the slipknot tight about his neck!

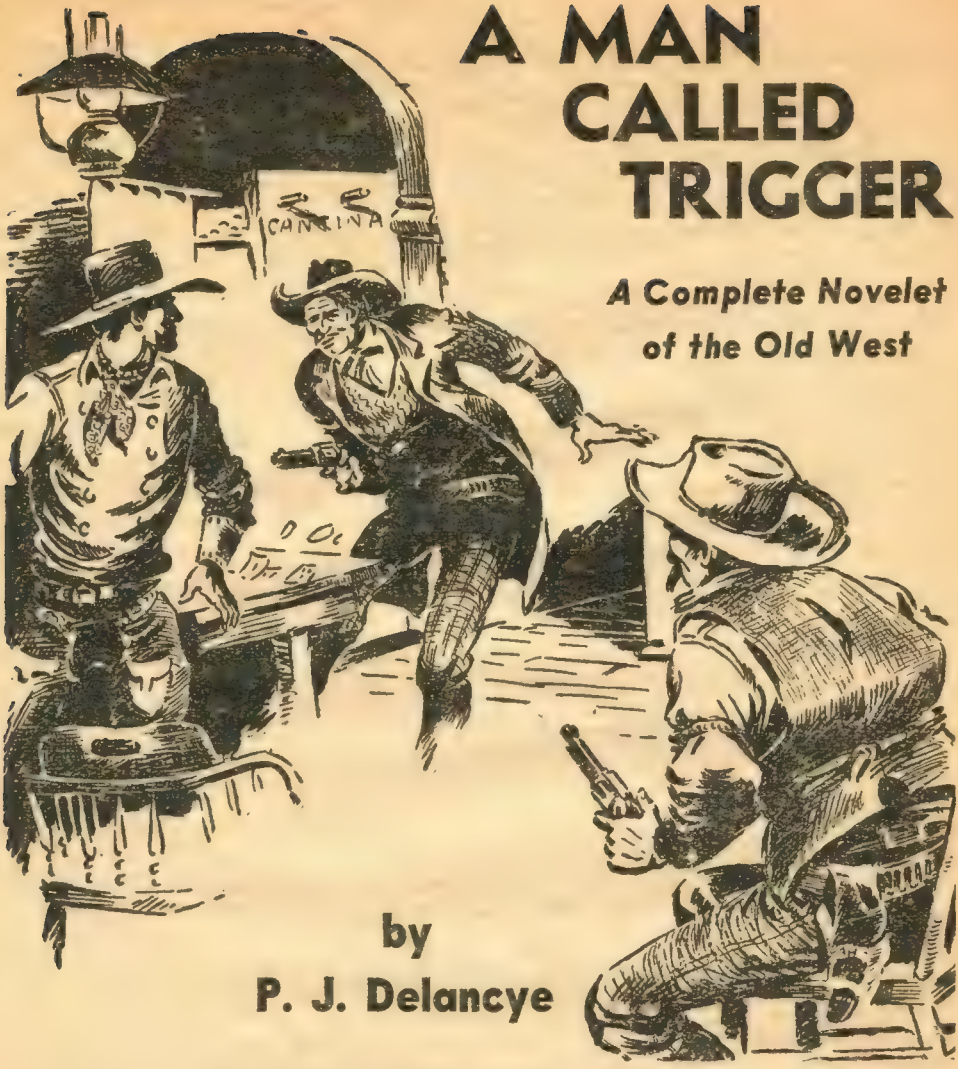
Cass watched through fast glazing eyes. By a supreme effort he kept alive. But his life sands were running out fast. Through dulled ears he heard the sheriff exclaim:

"I guess this clears up th' Red Gulch robbery. An' a lot of others. As shore as shootin' these air th' hombres we're lookin' fer. Too bad. Cass Hollister come of good stock."

The light in Cass' eyes flickered out like a windblown candle. But in death, a peaceful smile lingered on his hawklike, handsome features. He died, knowing his own were safe.

A MAN CALLED TRIGGER

A Complete Novelet of the Old West



by P. J. Delancye

Jack McCall came back to Tombstone to find the polecat who'd jumped his claim and drygulched his partner—and found himself branded an owlhoot, and tangled with the deadliest of all bandit-killers, Marshall Wyatt Earp;

TRIGGER JACK McCALL held to the side of the swaying stage. He looked down the narrow road ahead. It wound like a snake, it humped itself, it twisted with the abandon of a wild thing on its way past the great red crags which bordered it on either side.

Trigger Jack turned again to glance at the girl beside him. She must be from Tombstone, he thought. Her cheeks were gently curved in the soft glow of moonlight which played through the stage window, but they were too highly tinted with rouge. Her lips were round, full, almost sensuous, her hair a golden cascade

about the smooth whiteness of her neck. Her clothes were not of the rough frontier—her dress was red silk, her stockings were silk, her shoes low cut and fashionable.

She caught Trigger Jack's glance, returned his gaze with a flashing smile.

"I'm more comfortable on this stage when the man next to me wears his guns," she declared. The look in her clear blue eyes became suddenly probing.

"You're a stranger here, aren't you?" she demanded.

Trigger Jack smiled, but in the smile there was a look of strain, something bitter in the way he straightened his thin lips. His shoulders squared, his gray eyes took on a glint of steel.

"No," he answered softly, "I'm not a stranger, though some folks would like to make me out one. I lived here —once."

"You did?" Tense eagerness was in the girl's voice. "Tell me about it. Why did you leave?"

A harsh laugh escaped McCall's lips, he checked himself and answered in a guarded tone, "There's plenty of others will tell you about it when they see me get off this stage. Maybe you'd even better not be seen talking to me!"

The girl leaned toward him, her hand rested on his arm, her attitude became intimate. A strange tremor shook McCall's muscular form. He was unused to women, for months he had scarcely spoken to one, and the nearness of this beautiful girl was intoxicating. It went to his head, confused his senses, made him strangely distrustful of himself.

"I'm sure," the girl answered in her low, throaty voice, "that when we get to Tombstone, I'll talk to whom I please! I pick my own friends—and I think you're one I'd pick!"

McCall stiffened. "I was only warnin' you, miss," he confessed. He halted, as though afraid to proceed, then suddenly went on, "Not that I'm guilty of all they say I am. I've got my side of the story to tell!"

Again the girl leaned close. "Who are you?" she suddenly demanded.

"I'm Trigger Jack McCall."

"Oh!" Her exclamation was full of surprise, fear, almost, McCall thought.

"Now I know why I thought I'd seen you before," she acknowledged. "I—I'd seen your picture."

"Yes," was McCall's bitter rejoinder, "in the papers, with the details of some saloon shooting below it!"

The girl was silent.

"That wasn't of my own choosing." McCall's tone was defiant now, hard as brass. "If I'd had my own way, I'd be a miner, right here in Tombstone. I'd be working and living peacefully. I'd have my partner still with me. And—I'd be rich!"

BITTERNESS welled in his tone. His square jaw looked like granite in the pale white light which stole in the stage window. His hands gripped the sill beside him. Then he suddenly sank back in the seat. There was hopelessness in the gesture.

"And the mine," the girl pursued softly, "what happened to the mine?"

"The mine," he answered savagely, "belongs to a man named John Slade!"

A low exclamation came from the girl, her body tensed as though in the grip of some powerful emotion. Her grasp tightened on McCall's arm, and her voice was one he would not have recognized when she spoke again.

"So you, too," she murmured, and her tone was the purr of a tigress,

"have reason to hate John Slade!"

"I have reason," McCall answered hoarsely, "to kill John Slade, but I can't, just because some people are expecting me to, and will stretch my neck if I do! You see," he went on an instant later, "John Slade happens to hold all the cards—not honestly, but because he stacked the deck."

"Tell me about it," the girl urged softly.

"My partner, Slim Elliott, and I picked the best silver diggings around here, when the news got out and everybody came with a rush. We staked it out lawful and proper. We started workin' it. Then one day we had to go away for machinery. We were gone several days. When we came back, there were the new stakes, there was the claim in Slade's name, as though we'd never been near it!"

"Just claim jumping," the girl commented softly.

"Nothing else but. We went to the recorder's office—there was no record of our claim. It was in Slade's name, dated way back! And Elliott had filed for us, personal!"

"There was no chance," the girl interrupted, "that Elliott could have tricked you—in the beginning?"

McCall's sudden silence was savage. Then, in an instant he answered, "You don't know who you're talkin' about, miss!"

"I'm sorry!" Genuine contrition was in her tone. "Go on—tell me the rest of it!"

"We raged and stormed at the recorder. We threatened him. He got the marshal with him. They started diggin' things up outa my past. I'd worked on the Border—worked for ranchers tryin' to get a start, tryin' to save their herds from Border raiders. I'd had to do my share of six-gun work, that was all. Because I was a little handier than some, maybe, I'd got the name of Trigger Jack hung on me. They brought that up, sneered at it, made me out just a plain pay-gun. John Slade, they said, was a fine, honest citizen. He wouldn't be jumpin' no claim!"

"John Slade," was the girl's vehement rejoinder, "is a professional gambler!"

McCall's laugh was sardonic. "That's rated among the first professions, in Tombstone," he replied sarcastically.

The girl opened her lips as though to speak again, then suddenly gripped his arm. "Look," she cried, terror in her voice, "down there, between those boulders! Who—who do you suppose they are?"

McCall looked, then stiffened, as his hand streaked swiftly to the holster at his side. "Never mind," he cautioned her softly, "they may be just—riders. . ."

"They're robbers!" cried the girl. Some of the other passengers heard her. A sudden silence fell over the occupants of the stage.

"And no one ridin' shot-gun on the back!" wailed an oldster who had craned his neck out the window, then suddenly withdrawn it. "No chance to blast 'em from a distance!"

THE stage came to a sudden stop. They had not reached the turn in the road where the two riders were etched in the moonlight—for two other riders had broken from the buckbush, had surprised the driver as soon as the stage had slowed.

McCall's move was swift as light. He thrust the girl from the stage before him. He slithered out the door after her. No one else within the stage moved. They sat frozen with fear. McCall crowded the girl within the shelter of the wide-open door,

then leaping like a jungle beast upon its prey, with a powerful drive of his thigh muscles he landed behind the stage, his gun flashing from leather and spewing flame into the night.

He seemed to fire while still turned from his target, but mind and arm and body worked together, made him a lethal machine, pouring death and destruction from the muzzle of the long-barreled Peacemaker Colt. The first rider who was limned against the black shadow of buckbush buckled back into the darkness. The second had the brief instant he needed to get his gun clear of leather. A brief instant—but it availed him little. He fired at the blur that was McCall, but the burst of orange flame was matched by the fire that poured from Trigger Jack's muzzle; again he lifted his gun, but the second slug that left it tore at a crazy angle into the soft shadow of a wolfberry clump.

Trigger Jack was coming forward slowly now, glancing at first one, then the other of his victims. He had holstered his gun, as though to say that he had plenty of time to draw and shoot with the two other riders who now advanced upon the stage at a furious pace. The moon cast a silver brightness over the scene, made Trigger Jack McCall a target drawn in clear, clean lines.

The two riderless horses reared and pitched before McCall. The two mounts forked by bandits charged on. Behind the stage McCall could hear the girl's quick-taken breath. She suddenly leaped free of the door that shielded her, came swiftly to McCall's side, and just as he maneuvered backward, crouching for the battle in which the odds were so powerfully against him, he felt the girl's fingers clutching his arm.

"Get back there, for God's sake!" he told her, his arm thrust her from him, and for an instant his eyes left the two men who charged upon him, their horses' hooves now almost reared over his head.

A scream came from the girl's throat. She moved toward him once again, and in the white wash of moonlight he caught a vision of her, a vision which was to linger with him for many days, her upturned face, her eyes twin pools of terror, her form, wrapped in the closely fitting thin silk dress, like the creation of an ancient Grecian sculptor.

A roar of triumph, of savage, vindictive hatred came from the throat of the foremost rider. His gun roared, a flash of hellish heat seared Trigger Jack's temple, and he staggered backward, reeling drunkenly in the semi-darkness, his gun wavering unsteadily before him.

Again the man on horseback fired, but this time McCall had weaved sideways with the shot, and McCall's arm, coming swiftly out of the numbing paralysis that had gripped it for an instant, caught some of its old life, its deadly precision. Trigger Jack thumbed the hammer in a rapid, stuttering series of blasting explosions, and the rider who had only an instant before howled in triumph at the man below him, pitched backward out of the saddle to fall with a sickening thud on the lava road.

The last rider hesitated for a split second, hesitated as McCall thumbed back his hammer, shook his head to clear it, and crouched in a gun-fighter's crouch beside the stage, waiting to meet the final onslaught. The bandit's slender form was struck out of the moonglow as sharply as a painter could have caught its lines, even the beads on his jacket—a very Mexican jacket of leather and shining silver conchas—were clear and

distinct, and a startled gasp came from Trigger Jack when he saw that this last horseman wore a black mask over his face. None of the others had been masked.

THE instant's hesitation was portentous, it brought out of the sudden silence a tense moment of drama which McCall never forgot. The girl once more flashed out of the shadows like a sinuous, thinly-clad ghost. She stepped in front of McCall before Trigger Jack could prevent her, and the sudden, shrill cry which left her lips to strike with startling abruptness upon the sudden silence which surrounded the roadside scene seemed less an involuntary shriek than a cry of warning!

The masked bandit checked his horse, wheeled it, hesitated for an instant, then plunged off down the road.

"Why did he run when you called to him?" demanded an old man suspiciously of the girl. "Maybe—maybe you know him?"

The girl turned to face him.

"He may have thought," she replied swiftly, "that he knew me. Very possibly he did. Possibly he had reason to fear me!"

"Then if you know," cut in another in an evil tone, "tell us who he is!"

"I've done enough if I drove him off," returned the girl angrily. "Trigger Jack McCall protected all of you! I didn't see any of the rest of you going for your guns! You'd have sat inside and left all of us at the mercy of the bandits! It's a good thing for you that McCall was along. It's a good thing for you that I frightened a bandit away. He might have shot McCall, and that would have been the only damage he could have done—in this outfit!"

"Get back to your dance hall where you belong," barked a heavy-jowled man who had lumbered forward. "Decent folks—"

Trigger Jack McCall stepped swiftly in front of him. He reached up, took the man's nose between his knuckles and tweaked it. Then with the flat of his hand, he pushed the fellow in the face so suddenly that he tumbled down into the tangle of buckbush behind him.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head!" barked McCall, and at the sound of his voice other men drew back a step. McCall's voice was not heavy, but it had in it a metallic note as dangerous as the warning growl of a mountain lion.

"There's something funny about you Tombstone people," he said. "You take in a snake and drive out a white man—or woman. You drove me out, once. I'm back now, and if any of you want to start driving me out again, come on out where the moonlight's brighter and we'll match draws! You can all go to hell!"

HE GLARED at them again, each in turn, then spoke sharply to the driver.

"Get up on that stage and start for your damned town, and don't be all night about it!"

The driver obeyed, the men, some of them muttering fiercely under their breaths, but none of them wishing to match his gun-play against the exhibition he had just witnessed, climbed slowly back into the stage. One or two women stared wonderingly and fearfully at the girl. . . McCall's ears were pitched to catch murmurs now, for about the girl he was keenly curious. The name "Marie Costello" reached him before the grinding of the wheels began. . . Marie Costello!

That name told him a lot! He caught his breath sharply. He pinched himself to see if he were dreaming. Marie Costello!

Her father had been the irascible old rancher who had held his big Mexican spread against the raids of his Latin neighbors. He had never moved north of the Border. Finally charges of outlawry had been brought against him, just because, as McCall had always thought, he lived where the raiders lived. Old Costello had defied his enemies, he had shot it out with them when they tried to string him up one night, and had brought up a houseful of sons who lived by the gun.

All sons but one, and that one—Marie. Beautiful, high-strung, adventurous, she had ridden with her brothers, fought Mexicans with them, fought marauders with them. The odds against the Costello family grew, for Mike Costello had grown wealthy, more of the unwashed scum that came to the Border coveted his possessions. The Costello fights grew more frequent, the dangers greater. One by one the boys went down before enemy bullets.

Old Mike went down—one night—but not until he had tallied for his attackers three times over. The girl Marie—rumor said she'd been carried off, been taken to the hacienda of Don Burlete, the scourge of the Border, had been held there until she became his captive bride. . .

That was the last McCall had heard of her, when he had left Tombstone before. Now she was back—and what had the women said a moment before?. . . Something about a dance hall?. . .

The stage was rolling swiftly on its way now. They rounded a bend, and in the distance sparkled a cluster of lights, gay, twinkling lights which stood out against the blackness of the rolling country like a cupful of gems in a giant's paw. . . Tombstone! Things had been hard for McCall there before. Things must be hard for the girl there now. But McCall had a purpose, and that was to take back what was his own, to wrest from the treacherous fingers of John Slade the mine that Slade had stolen, to avenge his partner Slade had slain, to make the marshal of Tombstone eat the words with which he had blistered McCall out of town.

Tombstone. Narrow streets. Ramshackle buildings. Noise, disorder, confusion. Cowboys drunkenly riding horses up and down these streets, blasting at the blue dome of the sky with their six-guns. Corner buildings blazing with lights, echoing to the din of stamping boots, emitting the crazy tinkle of tin-pan pianos.

THE Silver Palace. A long barroom, another tinkling piano, a roomful of bellowing cowmen, the slap of cards on tables, the clink of glasses on bottle, the reek of whisky and perfume and strong cigar smoke. A small room, off the large room; a man seated at a table, shuffling a pack of cards, glancing from time to time out into the large room, sizing up the entries at the bar, looking at his watch impatiently. John Slade was waiting for the gamblers who came with the latter half of the evening, gamblers who played for stakes that were worth John Slade's while.

Trigger Jack McCall parted the swinging doors of the Silver Palace and strode in. He stopped at the bar, glanced at the row of bottles ranged on the wall, hesitated, then turned his back on them. He glanced appraisingly at each of them, then moved on. He paused outside the door of the little room where John

Slade sat. He freed his gun of crimp, twitched the holster so the butt of the forty-five jutted handily, settled his belt on his waist, then moved into the doorway.

He stood there staring at Slade when the latter glanced up. Slade started, then as his eyes met McCall's, he became immovable as a statue. His features, square and hard, with a jutting chin and full lips and coal-black eyes, worked slightly as though beneath a mask he would not release, and for a full half-minute neither man spoke.

Slade's hand, beneath the table was moving. It was moving almost imperceptibly, but Trigger Jack caught the movement, and his thin lips snapped a command: "Don't try to shake that derringer out of your sleeve, Slade!"

Slade smiled, a smile which seemed to pull the corners of his lips down, rather than up.

"You figure everybody's a gunslinger, don't you McCall? I suppose that's natural."

"I figure a snake for a snake," was McCall's icy answer, "and you'll have to be faster with your gun than you are with those cards, you tin-horn, to beat me in a game of draw—my kind of draw, I mean!"

"I figured you'd come back some day, McCall," Slade remarked. His eyes bored at McCall, his face remained a mask. "I'm ready for you. You couldn't get out of this saloon fast enough to escape what I've got ready for you."

McCall's eyes flashed fire. The gaze he bent upon Slade would have withered a less hardened man. "You were always a bluffer, Slade," McCall gritted. "You work that bluff on suckers. It won't work with me. There's nothing on earth you could do to me. There's nothing you could do before I could snap a shot at you that would hit you right between the eyes! Want to see me do it?"

McCall's hand moved slowly toward the jutting holster at his side. His eyes narrowed, but they narrowed with a glint of pleasure.

"Stop that, McCall!" The words came like bullets from Slade's lips. McCall's hand ceased its slow, threatening movement, but his icy eyes remained riveted on the black orbs of his enemy.

"If I stop, it'll be because you decide to give me back my mine!"

"Give you back your mine? Are you crazy, man? You've seen the records, I hope!"

"The records," McCall made answer, his hand again beginning its deadly movement, "were false, and you know it. Talk fast, Slade!"

Slade's eyes flicked over McCall's shoulder then, for the briefest of split seconds, but the glance was telltale. McCall leaped to the side, his body twisted like an eel, and his gun flashed from the holster, all in one coordinated movement so smooth that those who saw it never knew its speed.

"YOU can't stick up this game," bellowed the newcomer, his voice so loud that no one in the room could fail to hear it. As he spoke, his hand streaked toward his hip. McCall's practiced eye followed the movement, timed it, realized almost without conscious thinking that he faced a real gun-fighter, one of the best.

Trigger Jack weaved sideways out of his crouch as he came erect, his body swung about, he left only a blur for the big man to shoot at. His gun hissed from its scabbard as his body straightened, and almost as it cleared leather its muzzle was tipped with

fire. McCall could take no chances. He faced a real gun-hawk and he knew it. His shot went straight and true. A black hole appeared between the big man's eyes, his arm relaxed, his gun pointed crazily at the open doorway, an agonal spasm contorted his coarse features, and the room echoed the second time to the roar of gun thunder, followed by the musical tinkling of glass, as the big man's bullet crashed through an empty bottle on a nearby table. . .a tinkling which sang a mournful requiem for the gun-fighter who fell now, face on the floor, crashing down like a great Goliath at the hands of an antagonist whom, only an instant before, he had held in supreme disdain.

A silence fell on the crowd in the Silver Palace. A silence which seemed to have more weight coming on the heels of the noisy din which had reigned a moment before.

Trigger Jack's weapon was back in its holster. Smoke curled from the open tip of the leather sheath, curled in a thin blue stream which seemed a last fantastic decoration for the bloody scene which had ended the career of the big gunman who lay prone. McCall's eyes were slitted with hatred. The killing had been forced on him—but he had dealt a blow, a blow at the people who had robbed him and wronged him and whom he had come back to fight and to defy.

Slade's gunman had been considered the fastest man in Tombstone—save one alone—and that one now parted the bat-wing doors and entered the saloon.

He was a tall man, this newcomer. He walked with a peculiar, deliberate slouch. He seemed incapable of hurrying. His eyes were blue, and hard as steel, and they flicked all about him. His arms were long and ungainly. At his side was strapped the longest pistol McCall had ever seen.

From stock to muzzle the weapon must have measured a good twelve inches. The gun swung backward and forward slowly as the tall man walked. His blue eyes took in the figure on the floor, then lifted to McCall.

McCall saw something then which had escaped him up till that instant —on the open, faded blue vest the man wore glittered a star. This man was marshal of Tombstone, then, but he was not the same marshal who had driven McCall out of town!

A low murmur ran through the crowd. McCall heard it. It had a fearful sound. It was the murmur which only purrs from the throats of a mob when a man has come among them who strikes awe into them, a man nobody dares affront or question.

"Wyatt Earp'll fix him!" vowed the speaker.

A LITTLE shiver ran through McCall. A sensation he had never known nor imagined before, a quiver of strange, wild excitement. He was facing Wyatt Earp! He was facing the fastest gunman in the whole country—in the whole world. When had Wyatt Earp been made marshal of Tombstone? This was a surprise, a staggering surprise, and it fell on McCall like a death blow.

Wyatt Earp continued his advance, slowly, deliberately, without hurry. His lips had a mournful droop beneath his short mustache.

Earp came to a standstill scarcely a foot away from McCall. His level eyes bored at Trigger Jack.

"You kill this man?" he said quietly, pointing to the huge, still body on the floor.

Trigger Jack was rescued from his

momentary excitement. An icy calm gripped him.

"Yes, I killed him," he answered. "What do you think I'd do, when he came at me with a gun?"

"He hadn't tried to draw a gun till McCall threw down on him!" came in a raucous tone from the doorway. Slade stood there, his eyes glittering like a snake's, his face contorted with rage and hatred.

McCall turned toward Slade, a violent storm of anger shook him, swept him off his feet, robbed him of reason. He leaped toward Slade, his hands outstretched, his brain afire with the thought that he must close his fingers about that fat throat, that he must throttle the life from this lying, thieving fiend.

He dived toward Slade. The world was a red haze before him. He reached, pawed with his hands, then became aware that steel bands encircled him. He was borne swiftly backward.

"Let me go—let me kill him!" rasped from McCall's throat. "He robbed me! He stole my mine!"

The sardonic laughter of John Slade was wafted to his ears. It had its echo in a rocking wave of laughter which drifted from the bar, and McCall felt a fierce pounding in his head.

Then Wyatt Earp stepped back. Trigger Jack went limp, but with a fierce determination he kept himself upright. He looked once more into the steely eyes which met his own. "Don't you know who he is?" he blared at Earp, and pointed out the arrogant figure of John Slade.

"I know who he is," was Earp's gruff reply. "I don't know you!"

"I'm McCall—Jack McCall. Sam Elliott and I had the Ace-High mine. That skunk took it away from us—jumped our claim!" Again McCall pointed to Slade, made as though to leap at him, and the gambler retreated a step.

"You'll have to prove that!" Earp grunted. His gaze fastened itself upon Slade. "Come here, you!"

"I have the title to that mine," he declared confidently. "There never was any doubt of it. His partner lost money to me in a card game. He deeded me his half. I put up a stake to show my ownership. This gunslinger came along, didn't take time to ask questions, began throwing lead, and got the worst of it!"

"That's a lie!" blared Trigger Jack. "If you're telling the truth, how do you account for Slim Elliott getting killed in that same gun fight?"

"YOU shot him in the back, to shut his mouth and claim his share if you won that gun fight!" snarled Slade, his eyes on Trigger Jack.

"No, he didn't!" Earp's gruff voice broke suddenly into the exchange. "I size people up my own way. This ranny may be a killer, but he didn't shoot his friend in the back! I'll vouch for that, and don't contradict me!"

"I can get people to tell you that Slim and I found those diggings," McCall told Earp with such earnestness that the gun-marshal of Tombstone thrust him away again.

"All in its own time," he growled. "I'll hear this and investigate it. If there's been crookedness in the recorder's office, I'll see to that. There's a new recorder now. The old one went out with the old marshal. Things may be pretty difficult to prove!"

"You'll prove nothing!" rasped Slade. "I got the record—"

"Shut up!" Earp's voice was like the cracking of a whip. "I'll ask for

remarks when I want 'em. Now, young feller, come over to my office. I'll get a couple I know here who saw this shooting, and we'll have a talk about it. If he drew first, you don't have anything to worry about. But don't try any funny business!" He patted the long Buntline pistol which hung at his hip. "I usually don't aim to use this, but I can!"

He need not tell that to Trigger Jack, who knew the reputation of every gunman in the West. How well he remembered the tales—he hadn't believed some of them at first—of how the toughest gunmen who ever came out of Texas had gone up to Dodge City to meet their Waterloo at Earp's hands, when that redoubtable individual was gun-marshal there!

Earp took him by the arm. They turned together toward the rear door of the place. As Earp stretched his hand toward the knob, the door burst open. A gasp came from McCall's throat. Facing them was Marie Costello!

She had changed her clothing. She was wearing a dress of white silk. Her hair was twisted enchantingly about her head, and in it were thrust two roses. Her dress was cut low, was a revealing thing such as McCall had never seen on the streets of Tombstone. She wore red satin slippers. For an instant McCall forgot his rage at Slade, his qualms at being in the custody of Wyatt Earp, forgot everything but the glorious vision before him—a girl who looked as though she might have stepped out of an old painting! She was foreign to everything that was rough and crude in this frontier town, she seemed to belong to a courtly drawing room.

Her eyes widened. "You—with Marshal Earp!" she gasped. "Tell me—what has happened?"

McCall was mute for an instant, and the girl's gaze strayed accusingly to the famous gun-marshal.

"Wyatt Earp, what's going on here?" she demanded sharply.

"You 'tend to your knittin', Marie," he ordered brusquely. "This felfer just shot a man. He's in my custody."

"Shot a man?" gasped Marie. "Not Slade?" Her eyes were suddenly bright, her breath came quickly, her bosom rose and fell beneath the low-cut gown. "Tell me, was it Slade?"

"You look like you wished it was," growled Earp. "You shouldn't give yourself away like that, Marie! Folks'll be talkin' about you! No, it wasn't Slade. It was a friend of Slade's—Shrug Peters."

"Shrug Peters was no friend of anyone's!" Marie denied stoutly. "He only came here two weeks ago. He was just a pay-gun, working for Slade. Slade hired him as a bodyguard!"

WYATT EARP nodded. Then he turned as a rough voice accosted him suddenly. A well-dressed man who stood with his hand on John Slade's shoulder had spoken, and his red-nosed pudgy face was twisted into a mask of hate.

He pointed his finger at Marie Costello.

"Marshal," he blared at Wyatt Earp, "I demand the arrest of that girl. She was an accomplice in the stage robbery we were tellin' you about when you came in to look over this shooting!"

Trigger Jack whirled about at the man's words. He recognized him dimly as one who had got on the stage a few stops back, though he

could not recall seeing him for more than an instant after the stage had stopped in Tombstone.

Earp let go McCall's arm. He turned about to face the well-dressed man. "I suppose you got something to back up your words?" he queried.

"Do you want to know what happened?" blared Slade's companion.

"Yes, if you know what you're talking about!"

"That girl screamed at one of the robbers. She warned him off. She warned him away from that gunslinger that was on the stage!"

"You mean to tell me that just because she screamed, it was a warning to one of the robbers?"

"Yeah. It was the way she screamed."

"Not enough to convince me," was Earp's flat statement.

Marie Costello stepped forward, past Trigger Jack, past Wyatt Earp. She faced the man who had accused her.

"If anyone knows anything about the robbery, it is you, along with some friends of John Slade's!" she cried. "Do you want to know whether I can prove it? No, I can't prove it, but I will, some day. One of you always rides in the stage, just to throw off suspicion. If you'd lost anything tonight, you'd have it back by now!"

"Wait!" Wyatt Earp held up his hand. When he spoke, his voice brought instant silence, instant attention.

"You're talkin' out of turn, both of you," he said to Slade's companion and to Marie Costello. "I haven't been here but two weeks. Give me a little more time, and I'll have my own ideas on these stage robberies that've been gettin' so frequent of late. In the meantime, I got other things to tend to. But unless you got something more than a girl's scream to tell me about, don't take up my time!"

"There he is now—him and the marshal! Come on, boys, let's get him!"

This bellow broke from the front door, which had just been pushed violently open to admit a dozen men. Some of them were miners. Some were cowboys, and most of these seemed by their speech to have been drinking.

The cowboys were in the lead. They thundered across the floor. One of them caught up a bottle, poured himself a drink, tossed it off, and stamped away without paying. A howl came from the bartender and he reached under the bar for a bung starter.

"You the new marshal?" blared the leader of the group.

Wyatt Earp stared at him, then began a slow advance. He moved deliberately, as he had when he came for Trigger Jack.

A pace away from the other, Earp stopped.

"What do you want with the new marshal?" he demanded. His tone was deadly as the rattler's buzz.

"I'll tell you what we want, Mr. Lawman," said the other belligerently. "You got a prisoner there. Give him to us, and we won't hurt you!"

THE words were scarcely out of his mouth when Earp went into action. Trigger Jack, standing behind him, never forgot the scene.

Earp's hand struck his hip, his long Buntline pistol came out, flashed upward, came down in a short, chopping blow. His opponent dropped to the floor.

"Get out of here, you scum, or I'll take every one of you in!" he threatened.

Off to one side, out of Earp's range

of vision, a man with the complexion of a half-breed had crouched behind a chair. Trigger Jack's eye caught the movement as the swarthy chap lifted a knife, balanced it on the palm of his hand, then flicked it through the air. It came toward Earp's head like a flash of silver below the tinted glare of the ceiling lights.

Trigger Jack acted from instinct. There was no time to think of what to do first. There was no time to plan the next move. He caught Earp by the shoulder, jerked him violently backward, drew his head just out of range of the lethal blade which cut a shimmering path before Earp's eyes.

Wyatt Earp had dipped from the knees, when the knife went past him. He shifted his weight, slipped sideways, his movements like those of a boxer. He presented a moving target during the moment he took to cast a lightning glance over the murderous crowd before him. Then his Buntline spoke, once, twice, a third time. Trigger Jack was in at his side, his Peacemaker throwing down on the man nearest him, when Earp caught his arm.

"Don't need to kill any of 'em," he cautioned gruffly. "I winged mine in the arm, all three of 'em." Trigger Jack looked.

Panic seized the rest. They bolted for the door. Their bullying shouts had changed to cries of alarm.

From the doorway behind them Trigger Jack heard a low cry, a cry of fright, and turned to look into the terror-stricken eyes of Marie Costello. She stared at him with unbelief, as though unable to comprehend the fact that he still stood on his feet after the thundering gunfire which had rocked the flimsy walls about them, shaken the loose win-

(Continued On Page 104)

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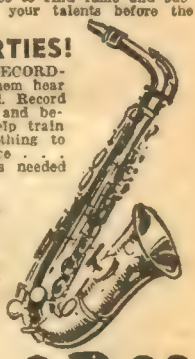

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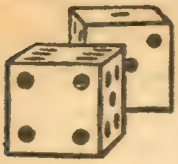

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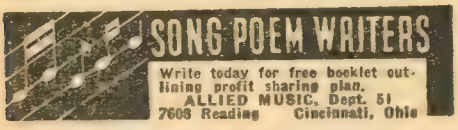
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(Continued From Page 103)

dows, filled the dimly lighted room with a holocaust of blazing red.

Trigger Jack leaped toward her. He took one step, when the girl screamed. Her eyes were riveted on the doorway. Trigger Jack followed her gaze. He saw the batwing doors slip open. He saw the double-barreled muzzle of a shotgun poke through. Then, with a deafening roar, fire belched from the twin muzzles, and the lights in the room were extinguished in the crashing of shattered glass.

He groped his way toward the girl. In the darkness he heard Earp's soft cursing. Then a crashing blow caught him on the head, thunder rocked his brain, and the world faded out in a blaze of colored lights.

Life came back to Trigger Jack McCall in a rush of hurrying footsteps. He moved, tried to lift himself from the rough board on which he lay. His muscles were throbbing cords of agony.

THE footsteps still moved about him, the night was filled with whispered sounds. Men moved swiftly, silently, within a small space bounded by narrow walls. Trigger Jack pulled himself up, inch by inch, till he could see something more than dim ghost shapes flitting before him. A beam of pale moonlight came in a narrow window. With a mighty effort he came erect. He moved over to the window, caught one glimpse outside.

He was looking out on an alley. He barely remembered it. He looked out again, recognized the gray, shabby walls of the Tombstone Bank.

Then a pale light flickered in the room. A lantern with a clumsy tin guard sent its feeble rays about a table on which it had just been placed. The ghostlike figures took on shape. Fury boiled within Trigger Jack's brain as his eyes fell on the trim, black-clad figure of John Slade.

Slade had paused by the table. He was speaking rapidly, earnestly, to the men who faced him there.

"At twelve o'clock the watchman comes around," he asserted. "He's got a key. He checks up on everything once each hour all night. Our job is to jump him, grab the key, and make it easy for ourselves to get inside. After we're inside you nitroglycerine men can go to work, and God help you if you aren't able to work as fast as you claim to be!"

"We can do our work," blared one of the men who faced John Slade, "don't worry

about that. All we want to know is, can you take care of us? We doubt like hell that you can. You're no match for this new marshal! He'll gun you off the face of the earth!"

"The hell he will!" roared Slade. "When we get ready to take that bank, we'll take it! The marshal's a bluff! I haven't run this town for ten years without knowing how to do it!"

"When do we get our split?" growled another.

"As soon as we get out of town. How could you get it any sooner?"

A door opened. Another man arrived.

"The watchman's on his way!" he hissed. "I just seen him comin' up the street!"

"All right," Slade barked. "Get ready. Mike, Steve, get on the door. You're the fastest for this kind of work. Take care of that watchman and get his key!"

Two hulking forms moved to the door. They pulled the door ajar. A sliver of moonlight outlined the crack in the door, gave Trigger Jack a glimpse of the shadowed alleyway.

The men called Steve and Mike waited, tense, motionless. Crunching steps finally made themselves heard from a distance. They grew louder, came closer. The door began to move, opened gradually. Steve and Mike hunched themselves beside it, crouched like two jungle beasts waiting for their prey.

The footsteps halted, a lantern cast a brief flash of red light in the alley, then the forms of Mike and Steve melted from the doorway as though they had been dissolved by some infernal magic. The two men were only a shadowy blur of motion as they streaked across the narrow space. In the silence the thudding blow which sounded an instant later was unnaturally loud in Trigger Jack's ears. Involuntarily he moved toward the open door.

Heavy hands were laid on him from either side.

"Here's the bird!" grunted the voice of Slade. "Hold him, men. We got a use for him! We'll leave him in the alley, beside the door, with a bullet through his head. That'll give this smart marshal something to work on, when he tries to figure out the robbery!"

Steve and Mike shouldered back into the room, bearing a lifeless, inert burden between them. They dropped to the floor the body of an elderly man, and the moonlight

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

brought into hideous relief the smear of blood which darkened his white beard.

"He won't kick no more," growled Steve. "Here's the key!"

Slade snatched at it. With a man at either side of him, he moved out through the shadowed doorway.

Trigger Jack waited, trying to sense whether the strength which had left him with that terrific blow on the head might be returning, whether he could trust the muscles in his arms and legs for one mighty effort which might free him from his captors.

One of the men who had left with Slade slipped back through the door. "It's all right," he announced softly. "The boss got in. Come on, you two safe-blowers!"

The two men addressed moved slowly to the door.

"We didn't come all the way from San Francisco to be caught in no trap!" one of them growled.

"Hurry up!" snarled the man who had come for them. "The boss will make it tough for you if you don't!"

With seeming reluctance the two safe-blowers moved out into the moonlight, crossed the narrow alleyway and disappeared into a small, dark doorway in the rear of the bank.

TRIGGER JACK set his muscles. Now, if ever, he must make the one great effort which might defeat those who were plotting against him.

Suddenly every man within the room froze in his tracks. Coming down the alley from the opposite direction was the muffled tread of horses—thud, thud. . .

"What the hell is that?" hissed one of them.

Silence. Then the thud, thud, of the muffled hooves. . .

"Good God almighty!" breathed one of them. "Four riders. They ain't from around here, either! One of 'em's got a mask on. The rest is strangers! What the hell do they want?"

The growing tension in the room had slowly but surely relaxed the vigilance of Trigger Jack's captors. He aided this by feigning a state near unconsciousness, by slumping against the wall, sagging heavily upon those who held him up.

Then the thudding outside ceased. There was a creaking of saddle leather, the sound of men's footsteps moving softly, cautiously,

slowly. An exclamation, a soft curse of exultation floated in the door.

"We timed 'er right, boys! They're in there! Easy, now!"

Hands fell away from Trigger Jack, the force of iron muscles which had crowded him to the wall let go, he sensed his moment and he took it. All the violence of his pent-up rage, of his desperation to strike the blow that should free him was exploded in one short, fierce lunge he made at the man nearest him. He clawed at the holstered gun at the other's side, snaked it free of leather, leaped to the door with the hammer eared back.

"The first man to move gets it through the belly!" he hissed, and the pale shaft of moonlight which bathed him brought into sharp relief the gun he held. He had the drop.

Trigger Jack backed through the door, into the alleyway, and cast a glance over his shoulder as he slipped behind the door which shielded him from sight for an instant. Four men surrounded the open door of the bank, four men who crouched with guns in their hands, peering intently into the dark interior of the building where only a little light flickered dimly on the floor.

Three of the men who hunkered there had attempted no disguise, and the moonlight was falling on three as hardened faces as Trigger Jack had ever looked upon. One man was scarred, another wore a full black beard, the third had a square, flat face with no trace of human expression in it. The fourth—Trigger Jack caught his breath, looked again and then was sure—the fourth was the tall, slender lad who wore a black mask over his face, who wore a Mexican jacket with shining-silver conchas and who had been the only one of the stage robbers to escape that night.

One of his companions turned when the tall lad had been silent for an instant—he with the long, trailing scar. He was so hesitant, he resolved doubt by action, he dived straight for the darkened corner which was giving momentary sanctuary to the man who was trying so desperately to make good his escape.

"Grab for the sky!" Trigger Jack hissed at him, stepped clear of the shadows and let the other see the gun he held on him. A startled cry came from the tall, masked bandit.

"You're McCall!"

Trigger Jack advanced a step.

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 107)

"How did you know who I am?" he queried softly.

The masket bandit came swiftly to meet him.

"We have no quarrel with you!" he exclaimed. "You're the one who looked out for my sister tonight! Only for God's sake get in here close to the building! Don't move or make a sound! We've got some business here, and you nor anyone else can stop us now!"

"Your sister!" came from McCall's lips in amazement. "Then you're a Costello—"

"Stop!" The masked bandit was violent in his command, he clapped his fingers over McCall's mouth. "Don't speak the name! I won't do that to her!"

"They said you were all dead," Trigger Jack persisted softly.

The bandit laughed harshly. "That's what they thought—the desire for revenge got me well with three slugs in my chest! I've lived to kill John Slade! John Slade took our spread from us, John Slade was behind every raid that was blamed on Border tramps! Now John Slade is inside that bank, robbing it, but he'll never come out alive! I've lived through agony for this moment! I'm going to hammer six slugs through his belly and watch him die!"

Costello's voice had risen as he talked, he had moved into the bright shaft of moonlight, stood limned there, a figure striking as he was terrible. His move was fatal—from the window of the shack across the alley, the one which harbored the remainder of Slade's gang, came a burst of orange fire, a thunderous blast which richocheted in rapid echoes between the two walls. Without a sound, Costello's tall figure swayed like a reed struck by a sudden gust of wind, then he toppled and fell.

The shot that brought him down had not gone unanswered. Before the rocking echoes had died Trigger Jack's gun had fired at the flash of red, and he knew that he had not fired in vain when a fierce scream of agony told him that his bullet had found a lodging place.

With the firing of the two shots, the strained and silent waiting which had frozen both sides let go like lightning, the alleyway became a blazing hell of gunfire, and McCall dived for the body of young Costello, dragging it to the shelter of the bank wall.

He threw his lead with Costello's friends then, and every blast that burned from the

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

door or window of the shack across the way was answered with a smash of lead that was timed and deadly. McCall crouched by the wall, followed each flash from the other side, knew that his lead was not wasted when he triggered home his slugs. His nerves were things alive, he kept up a hammering gunfire, but his eye never left the door of the bank, for from that door must come John Slade, and then Trigger Jack intended to carry on for young Costello, intended to smash home the bullet that had been Costello's right to fire, intended to wipe out all grudges, settle all scores. He no longer weighed the right and wrong of the thing, the red mist before his eyes had cut off from his vision all the distractions which could draw his hand aside. It was John Slade who had ruined everything for Trigger Jack McCall, it was John Slade whom Marie Costello hated above all men on earth, it was John Slade whose henchmen had cut down her brother with a cowardly shot from behind.

GUNFIRE roared and yammered, red flame spat from window and door, bullets thudded into the side of the bank. A cry for help, a wail of distress, came from the men barricaded in the shack, and the second time that cry was raised an answer came from within the bank. Twin guns roared at the edge of the black square that marked the door, the man fighting beside Trigger Jack coughed and fell on his face, then the twin guns roared again, but this time Trigger Jack had dived forward as he heard the hammers click, and he only felt the wind of the slugs as they screamed past him.

He had waited for this moment, had waited and planned it since the fight began, his gun held one slug which he could have used before this but which he had saved for the moment he knew was coming. He dived—dived and lay still, but his eye was on the door and he waited for the black-coated shadow that would be John Slade. The shadow came, slipped out of the square of the building, but the white moonlight caught the flash of metal as he centered one gun on the prone figure of Trigger Jack McCall.

McCall's thumb eared back the hammer, his finger set on the trigger, the gun steady and drawn down dead center on Slade's dimly outlined body. The shot never left McCall's gun. A hand struck his weapon

(Continued On Page 112)

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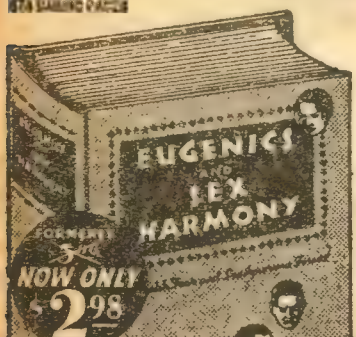

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(Continued From Page 110))

violently aside, a blood-choked voice gurgled in his ear, "He's mine—don't try to rob me of him!" then thunder crashed beside McCall's ear. The alleyway lighted to another burst of flame, and an answering burst rocked back from the door of the bank, but this shot blazed wildly to the side, and the bulky figure of John Slade rocked like a tree that shudders before the finishing blow of the woodsman. Choking, gasping, Costello fired again, leaving nothing to chance, making sure as death that his agonizing effort was not to be in vain.

Slade fell on his face, rolled over and tried to rise, then fell back, his head encircled with a ghastly nimbus of moonlight, his lips moving feebly with the curse his last breath was too weak to utter.

Silence fell on the narrow enclosure, a silence that spoke eloquently of the meaning of Slade's death, and it was only broken by the sound of stamping boots. Men were coming, hurrying, voices were being raised in shouts and cries, and suddenly the alleyway seemed no longer a place set apart, but had become the scene of a bedlam that was gradually centering around Trigger Jack McCall and young Costello.

Wyatt Earp, flanked by a brace of deputies, was cleaning out the shack. Trigger Jack could hear his voice, crackling with authority, bringing instant action where it was raised, "Batter 'em down, but don't kill anybody—you can take this gang in easy!" and almost immediately the few who remained of John Slade's gang were brought out under the menacing guns of Earp's men.

"Come here quick! Help this man that's hurt!" Trigger Jack called to the nearest of the deputies. "You can spare a man—you'll have to! Help me take him to a doctor!"

They sat young Costello up. Blood streamed from a wound in his head, his face was ghastly; he looked more like a ghost than like a living being. A tall figure stalked toward them, this time coming with a speed Trigger Jack had never seen him display. Wyatt Earp bent over young Costello.

"Sorry to see you here, Miguel!" spoke Earp, and his huge bony hand came out to support the bleeding youth. "Now that I've seen you, I got to take you in! I'll be easy as I can!"

Earp straightened then, straightened as the flutter of a silken dress and the aura

of a heady perfume startled him into whirling swiftly about. Marie Costello almost brushed him aside as she leaped past him to encircle her brother with arms which were white in the pale wash of moonglow.

"Miguel!" she screamed, "Why didn't you go? Why did you follow him here? You're hurt! You're bleeding!"

"My only chance at Slade," groaned Miguel Costello, "and I got him! I brought him down! I've paid Slade for making an outlaw of me! I've paid him for destroying our home, taking all we had! I've paid him for threatening you! Now I can die in peace!"

TRIGGER JACK laid a hand on Marie's arm.

"He isn't going to die," he assured her softly. "I've seen a lot of 'em shot, and I think he'll make it! But we got to get him to a doctor right away!"

"We'll carry him back to the hall where I dance," Marie said swiftly, "and get the doctor who's up over the dance hall. We must save him! We must!"

Wyatt Earp followed her a few paces, and when he spoke to her she suddenly whirled about, looking at the famous gun marshal as though afraid to credit his words. "Miguel's done a lot for the town tonight," Earp confided guardedly. "Don't think it'll be forgotten. 'Most everybody's thought he was dead—they don't need to know all we know!"

The girl gasped as the full significance of his words burst upon her. Then she looked up, saw Trigger Jack McCall carefully carrying Miguel down toward the dance hall. Pulling Earp with her, she moved swiftly after them.

"This man they call Trigger Jack," she said softly— "he's seems like a real man! There's nothing—nothing so bad against him, is there?"

Wyatt Earp chuckled noisily.

"Not a thing—or won't be when I get through handlin' things here," he stated with assurance. "But never mind that now. I got an idea you'll be findin' out plenty about him on your own hook!" He chuckled again as he plodded on ahead.

Marie had already left him. She was down where the dance hall structure loomed, and she and Trigger Jack were helping her brother through a doorway where dazzling lights twinkled over the narrow street.

The marshal sighed. "I'm glad I'll be able to help a little," he said softly to himself.

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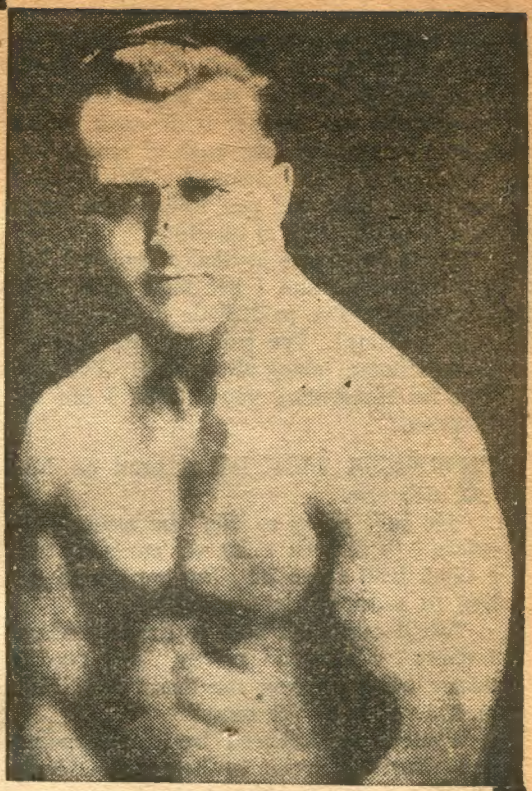

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